RUSSIAN AND SOVIET Story

M.Prishvin

A SELECTION

RUSSIAN AND SOVIET Story

M.Prishvin

A SELECTION

Raduga Publishers Moscow

Translated from the Russian
Designed by *Ekaterina Zaitseva*
Compiled by *V. A. Lazarev*

М. Пришвин

Избранное
Рассказы

Составитель В. А. Лазарев

На английском языке

© Состав, предисловие. Издательство "Радуга", 1985

© Raduga Publishers 1985

Printed in the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics

$\text{П}\frac{4702010200-374}{031(05)-85}$ 015—85

ISBN 5-05-000022-X

CONTENTS

Mikhail Prishvin. *Translated by Olga Shartse* 7

PHACELIA. A Poem. *Translated by Olga Shartse* 19

HUNTING STORIES

Romka. *Translated by Olga Shartse* 81
A Bush School. *Translated by Olga Shartse* 85
Yarik. *Translated by Olga Shartse* 90
Verny. *Translated by Olga Shartse* 98
Kate. *Translated by Olga Shartse* 107
Yarik's Love. *Translated by Olga Shartse* 119
Nerle. *Translated by Raissa Bobrova* 129
White Rainbow. *Translated by Olga Shartse* 142
The Chase. *Translated by Olga Shartse* 149
Anchar. *Translated by Olga Shartse* 158
The Death Run. *Translated by Olga Shartse* 169
The Snake. *Translated by Olga Shartse* 177
The Swamp. *Translated by Olga Shartse* 182
Mauve Sky. *Translated by Olga Shartse* 186

Blue Buns. *Translated by Olga Shartse* 187
The Smart Hare. *Translated by Olga Shartse* 191
My Hedgehog. *Translated by Olga Shartse* 193
A True Story. *Translated by Olga Shartse* 196
A Lone Crane. *Translated by Olga Shartse* 198
An Old Crone's Heaven. *Translated by Olga Shartse* 199
Grandfather's Felt Boot. *Translated by Olga Shartse* 201
The Chief Judge. *Translated by Raissa Bobrova* . . 204

DRIPPING FOREST. *Translated by Olga Shartse* 213

NIGHTINGALES. Stories About the Children of Leningrad 305
Botik. *Translated by Olga Shartse* 307
Children. *Translated by Olga Shartse* 309
Daddy-Doctor. *Translated by Olga Shartse* 314
Adoption. *Translated by Olga Shartse* 316
Romance. *Translated by Olga Shartse* 320
Granny and Granddaughter. *Translated by Olga Shartse* 324
Nightingale. *Translated by Olga Shartse* 329

THE SUN'S STOREHOUSE. A True Fairy Tale. *Translated by Ivy Litvinov* 331

THE EYES OF THE EARTH. From the Author's Diaries. *Translated by Olga Shartse* 395

FOREWORD

Mikhail Prishvin (1873-1954)

There are authors whose books become one's lifelong friends, and one such author is Mikhail Prishvin. In his essays and phenological notes, his hunting stories and sketches, his philosophical stories and novels he reveals to us all the beauty of the surrounding world, he probes the depths of Russian history and the Russian soul itself.

Prishvin took up writing rather late in life, when he was already thirty, and this is what he said about it in his diary: "I devoted the first half of my life, that is until the age of thirty, to mastering the elements of culture, or as I call it now, the wisdom of others. And after that, starting from the moments when I took up the pen, I declared a war on the wisdom of others with the aim of using it as my personal possession while yet remaining my own self."

Indeed, Prishvin always remained his own self, in his books and in the way he lived his

life. His "own self" was expressed mainly in his passionate striving to fathom the life of nature in its most subtle manifestations, and find the human element in all animate and inanimate nature.

When you read "Phacelia", Prishvin's poem in prose, you can smell the sun-warmed earth and the green birch leaf-buds, you can hear the grass growing, you feel initiated into that wonderful, harmonious world, which is called Nature. A keenly observant naturalist and a gifted word-painter, Prishvin in his sketches leaves an impression of landscapes infused with sound, colour and fragrance, and in this lies their inimitable appeal.

He spent his childhood on a country estate in Orel Gubernia, in Central Russia, which gave the world such great writers as Lev Tolstoy, Ivan Turgenev, Nikolai Leskov and Ivan Bunin. As Prishvin himself says his first tutors and teachers were the peasants with their pure and pliant Orel talk and their closeness to nature.

In the meantime there were his school years and then his enrolment in the Riga polytechnical school. This was at the close of the last century, when the revolutionary movement was gaining momentum in Russia. Prishvin was arrested as a member of a revolutionary circle, kept in solitary confinement for a year, and then sent into exile. But this did not break his spirit, rather the contrary. He wrote in his diary: "The happiest, the most sublime thing of all was that I became one with my friends.

There was nothing frightening any more about going to prison or enduring any torture because I was with my close friends and not alone."

Being politically suspect, Prishvin could not receive a higher education in Russia and in 1900 he went to study abroad. He was admitted to Leipzig University, and received the diploma of an agronomist. Here, he fell deeply in love for the first time in his life. His feeling for Varvara Izmalkova, a Russian student girl, was an overwhelming experience which wrought havoc to his views on life and on the purpose of his existence. "A woman stretched her hand to the harp, and from the touch of her fingers a sound was born. That is how it was with me—she touched me, and I burst into song," wrote Prishvin. But his happiness was short-lived. The pain in his heart, however, was lasting. The poem "Phacelia" which Prishvin called his "Song of Songs" is dedicated to the love of his youth.

On return from abroad, Prishvin worked for a time at the Academy of Agriculture in Moscow under the guidance of D. N. Pryanishnikov, a future famous academician. He wrote books on agriculture, and one of them, concerning the cultivation of potatoes, became widely known. Prishvin was married now, he had a growing family, new cares, and his earnings were meagre. Also, he became disillusioned in agronomy.

He left the Academy, rented the cheapest dwelling on the outskirts of Moscow and lived

from hand to mouth on his occasional earnings from the newspapers. "Because I wanted to become a real writer and not a hack, I had to suffer dire need," he wrote later.

Chance brought him into a circle of ethnographers, and in 1906 he went to the little studied North of Russia to collect tales, proverbs, omens and other folklore material. On return he wrote his first book "In the Land of Unfrightened Birds" (1907), and as a writer he was made.

Prishvin himself was not satisfied with his book although it had earned him admission to the literary world of Moscow and also his election to the Russian Geographic Society. The following year he undertook another journey to the Far North and described it in a series of articles, based on a vast wealth of ethnographic material.

Shortly after this book, in 1910-1914, Prishvin published his short stories: "The Krutoyarsk Beast", "A Birds' Cemetery", "Puddle", "The Black Arab", and others.

A collection of his stories and sketches in three volumes came out in 1912-1914, sponsored by Maxim Gorky who was at the time seeking out progressive Russian writers for the Znanie Publishing House. After this, Prishvin's name became known to all reading Russia.

He was one of those Russian writers who allied themselves with the Revolution of October 1917 and immediately joined in the work of educating the masses. Prishvin taught school

in Yelets, organised the protection of historical monuments, worked as a village librarian in Orel Gubernia, and then taught in a village school in Smolensk Gubernia. He put all his heart and soul into the education and upbringing of peasant children. In 1924 he wrote: "If my passion for writing did not demand the whole of me, I would never have given up this blessed work for which the teacher receives the highest reward there can be—the love of his pupils."

His writing in those years was inspired by his keen study of nature. He made observations and kept notes of the "daily changes in the look of the sun, the moon, a lake, a landscape, and man who was close to nature", and noted "thousands of touching little things accompanying the journey of our planet round the sun". He formed a genre of his own—poetic etudes and miniatures recording fleeting moments in the life of nature and man committed to nature. Several cycles were brought out: "Nature's Diary" (1925-1935), "Nude Spring" and "Dripping Forest" (1940).

"Dripping Forest" includes the best known miniatures from these three cycles. Probably the best are dedicated to early spring, which for Prishvin was always the most radiant and poetic time of the year and which he called "the spring of light".

This definition was suggested to him by his observations and was not simply a romantic image. For spring does begin with light, and much earlier than we notice it from the warmth,

the melting snow and ice, the running brooks and finally the new grass. After the brief "spring of light" comes the "spring of water". The water sings, the snow melts, the first birds return, the hazelnut bushes blossom, the sap rises in the birches. And now comes the "spring of green grass". "It is between the coming of the finches and the coming of the cuckoo that our spring is at its loveliest with a beauty as refined and complex as the fanciful intertwining of a birch tree's still bare branches. In this space of time the snow melts, the streams of water race away, the ground becomes covered with new grass and the first flowers which we hold so dear, the buds on the poplars burst, the fragrant and sticky little leaves open out, and the cuckoo arrives. It is then, after all the loveliest part is over, that everyone will say: 'Spring has come! How lovely! ' " And finally comes the no less beautiful "spring of the forest". The lakes are freed of ice, the cries of the cuckoos and the singing of the nightingales fill the woods, and then comes the day when a sudden hush falls over everything and the first thunderstorm, heralding the summer, breaks out.

People often say that there is magic in Prishvin's miniatures. The secret probably lies in the keenness with which he observes every tiny stirring of life, always discovering something interesting and important in the commonplace.

Poetry and factual knowledge co-exist splendidly in Prishvin's miniatures. Konstantin

Paustovsky, the well-known writer, related how a line from Prishvin explained for him a natural phenomenon which, until then, he thought was a chance thing.

"I have long noticed that flowers in the large flood-meadows on the Oka seem to have been gathered into gorgeous parterres, and elsewhere you see a ribbon of identical flowers snaking through the ordinary grasses. It's most clearly noticeable from the small U-2 plane which comes here to spray insecticide on the lakes and swamps.

"For years I have been admiring those ribbons of tall, fragrant flowers, but had no explanation for them.

"And then I found a perfectly clear and simple explanation in Prishvin's thumbnail sketch called 'Rivers of Flowers'. He says: 'Where the streams of spring water had come rushing along earlier, there were now streams of flowers.'

"When I read this I understood at once that those ribbons of lush flowers had sprouted in the silt left behind by the rushing water. It was like a flower map of the springtime streams."

Prishvin's phenological observations are always linked in his reflections with the life of man, with his immortality in the life and deeds of the next generations. This is what he says about the purpose of writing: "A writer must put in words what the world is living through silently. It may change the world itself."

The lyric miniatures, comprising "Nature's

Diary" and the other two cycles, marked an important stage in Prishvin's biography. Everything that followed was to some extent based on the experience acquired when writing these cycles, which is especially evident in his "Hunting Stories" and "Craneland".

The miniatures included in our cycle of "Hunting Stories" were written at different times in the course of his lifetime. Hunting was a passion with Prishvin, and also a means of keeping in close touch with nature.

He was a poet of nature and hunting. And at the same time a dedicated zoologist and phenologist. He often brought attention to the fact that in the life of many outstanding naturalists, such as Przhevalsky or Arseniev, hunting was the first step in their travels, in their discoveries and their tremendous achievements in the study and conservation of the earth's wealth. Prishvin wrote: "If I did not know myself for a hunter who understands perfectly when a hare may be shot and when that hare should be rescued at perhaps a risk to one's life, I would give up hunting in disgust and would rise up in arms against hunters."

Maxim Gorky, who liked the "wise simplicity" of Prishvin's hunting stories, thought "Nerle" the best of all and wrote to the author: "It is done like an etching and so skilfully that probably Dürer himself would have envied you. Not one superfluous stroke, it's wonderfully harmonious, comprehensive and palpable."

The story "Ginseng" (1933, originally called

"The Root of Life") expresses Prishvin's philosophical views and his profound appreciation of the historical role of the social transformations carried through in Russia after the Revolution. In the epilogue the author says: "Together with everyone working in our new culture I feel that the root of life has come into our creative life from its natural taiga environment, and that there is a better chance of finding it in our art, science and useful activity than in the depths of the taiga." Thus the theme of nature develops into a theme of love and goodness, a theme of patriotism. "Motherland, as I understand it," wrote Prishvin in his diary, "has nothing to do with ethnography or landscape. For me Motherland is everything that I love and fight for."

A new phase in Prishvin's work began during the Second World War. The mood of his writings has always been benign, and now his heart was filled with a mounting hatred for the enemies of his country and civilization as a whole, and his inner need to take part in the common struggle became more and more urgent. So, in 1943 he published a cycle entitled "Nightingales" about the home set up for the orphaned children evacuated from besieged Leningrad whose 900-day-long defence makes one of the most tragic and heroic chapters in the history of the Soviet Union.

At the same time Prishvin continued working on his autobiographical novel "A Tale of Our Time" begun way back in the 1920s. The romantic seekings of Alpatov, the main charac-

ter, are shown against the background of end-19th century life in Russia and Germany, and in Prishvin's words "form the story of a creative personality's development and give an analysis of creative work as such." Alas, the book remained unfinished. However, working on it had facilitated his writing of such well-known stories as "The Tsar's Road", "The Sun's Storehouse" and "Mast-Timber Woods".

"The Sun's Storehouse"—a "true fairy tale"—was written in the days immediately following the end of the war and is one of Prishvin's happiest, sunniest stories. A fairy tale usually means a made-up, fantastic story, but with Prishvin it is a vision of life in its true and complex wealth and unity where each detail is interesting in itself and at the same time is essential to the whole. Or else it can be put like this: a fairy tale is his means of disclosing the hidden movements of life, which in all forms of art are expressed symbolically. But he calls it a "true" fairy tale, meaning that life itself is a great, meaningful symbol secreting a wealth of "fantastic" meanings.

After this came a series of stories about working people, and finally the book "Mast-Timber Woods" (1953) which may be called a summing-up of his work. Konstantin Fedin, a prominent Russian writer, said that in this book were "all the qualities which Prishvin always possessed, all the art which he had elaborated and acquired as he went along, resulting in a crystallisation of his inimitable prose." Many of Prishvin's earlier

themes, ideas and images are further developed here. For Prishvin the forest is an inexhaustible source of spiritual wealth, the image of a symbol that embodies both the people's might and the people's dream.

* * *

Prishvin is justly regarded as one of the greatest bards of nature. But he did not simply sing praises to it: one of his main artistic principles was "to find the human element in nature". He said: "The artist's ability to see the world on its own, without himself in it, or feel he is the first man to enter the new world, is probably all an artist can do to enrich culture... Seeing life without himself in it, seeing those firs and birches on their own... Seeing them in their on-their-ownness is the artist's supreme creative moment..."

Prishvin contributed something entirely new to our understanding of nature and man's relationship with it. By the beginning of this century the study of this correlation had indicated that there must be no coercion or submission, only creative co-operation. Looking into the "mirror of Nature" Prishvin's hero cognizes it from his own reflection, for "it is all there in his soul". The author wrote in 1953: "My good friends, you must see that although I write about nature it is people I'm thinking about all the time. No, the spring of man is not the spring

of grass. I am thinking of the efforts that go into creating it, and am trying not to lag behind the others in this great and demanding cause." He never lagged behind. But his days were already numbered, and he died on January 16, 1954, in Moscow.

The legacy Mikhail Prishvin left us is a treasure of wisdom, kindness and optimism. His books disclose to the reader the beauty of the surrounding world, they make him think about the meaning of life, the meaning of happiness, and the need for self-perfection.

Prishvin's books were first translated into foreign languages fifty years ago, and public interest in his work continues to grow. This book will acquaint English speaking readers with the best of his miniatures, a form he had developed to perfection.

Prof. Valentin Lazarev, D. Sc.

PHACELIA

A Poem

CONFESSION

I was only a very young man when I began to fight this loneliness of the wilderness, appealing in my diaries to an unknown friend. With the years my entries, naive at first and purely factual, improved and became the source of all my books which attracted many friends to my wilderness. The purpose of my writing and the meaning of my "optimism", which my critics have mentioned so often, is to master this wilderness. The temptation of indulging in fiction-writing never appealed to me, and if all that is inessential is stripped away, in all my books I remain the author of notes about my actual emotional experiences.

My long-awaited friend arrived at last. Together we examined these spots—I mean, my notes—and in them we discovered, as one might discern in the spots on old wall-paper or in the design of an ice-encrusted window, the image of my love—Phacelia.

WILDERNESS

In the wilderness only one's own thoughts can be thought, and that is why people are afraid of the wilderness: they are afraid to remain alone with themselves.

It was a long, long time ago, but it has not receded into the past, and I shall not let it while I live. In that long ago "Chekhov" time, we, two agronomists, almost complete strangers, had to go together to the old Volokolamsk Uyezd, our business concerned with fodder-grass cultivation. We were driving a buggy. We came across a whole field of flowering blue phacelia. On this sunny day, the bright blue field was like a wondrous vision in the midst of the quiet colouring of the countryside around Moscow. It was as though blue birds had come here from a distant land, spent the night here, and then left that blue field behind them. There would be countless insects buzzing in that melliferous blue grass, I was thinking. But we could not hear anything because of the buggy clattering over the dry road. Enchanted by this potency of the earth, I forgot all about fodder-grass cultivation, and asked my companion to stop for a little, so I could listen to the hum of life in those flowers.

I cannot tell you how long that pause lasted, or how long I was there with the blue birds. Having flown about in spirit with the bees,

I turned to my companion to ask him to continue on our way, and here I noticed that this stout man with a common, weatherbeaten round face was watching me and peering at me with amazement.

"What did we stop for?" he asked me.

"You see, I wanted to listen to the bees," I replied.

He gave the horse a touch of the reins. And now I, in my turn, peered at him and noticed something. I glanced at him again and realised that this man, who was rational to the extreme, had also fallen into a reverie, understanding, perhaps through me, the magnificent strength of these flowers.

I was finding his silence awkward. I asked him a question, just to say something, but he ignored it entirely. It looked as if my unbusinesslike attitude to nature, or simply my youth, had brought back to him his own youth, a time when practically everyone is a poet.

In order to recall this stout, red-faced man with the thick neck to real life, I asked him a very serious, practical question:

"I think that without the support of cooperatives our propaganda of fodder-grass cultivation is just so much empty talk, don't you agree?"

"Did you ever have your own Phacelia?" he asked.

"What do you mean?

"Did you?"

I understood, and replied, as befitted a man,

that I had, naturally, of course...

"And she came to you?" he went on questioning me.

"Yes, she did..."

"And why did she stop coming?"

This hurt. I did not say anything, I merely shrugged indicating that she was gone, vanished... I thought for a minute, and then said about the flowers:

"It's as though blue birds had slept here and left their blue feathers behind."

He looked deep into my face in silence, and then drew his own conclusion:

"Well, that means, she won't come any more."

He glanced round the blue field, and said:

"All what's left of the blue bird are the blue feathers."

I fancied that he strained and strained and at last pushed the tombstone over my grave: I had still been waiting, and now it seemed to be over for good and she would *never* come.

And suddenly he burst into sobs. I no longer saw his thick neck, his shrewd little eyes, hidden in folds of fat, his fleshy chin, and I felt sorry for the man, for man as such in his outbursts of intense feeling. I wanted to say something nice to him, I picked up the reins, drove to the stream, dipped in my handkerchief and mopped his face with it. He pulled himself together, wiped his eyes, took the reins into his own hands again, and on we drove as before.

After a while I ventured to voice what then seemed to me a thought entirely my own, that without the support of cooperatives we would never be able to persuade the peasants to introduce clover into their crop rotation.

"And were there nights of love?" he asked, taking no notice of what I said.

"Of course there were," I replied like a real man.

He fell to thinking and—what a tormentor! — asked:

"You mean there was only one night?"

I had enough, I got a bit angry, but, controlling my temper, I answered him in the words of Pushkin:

"One night, or two—my life entire."

BLUE FEATHERS

Catkins appeared, wonderful, golden catkins, on some of the birches which faced the sun. Leaf-buds were only burgeoning on other birches, and still on others leaves opened out and sat on the branches like tiny green birds, marvelling at everything in the world. There they sat on the thin branches, over there, and over there... And for us, people, they were not simply leaf-buds, they were moments which would never return if we missed them. And out of the multitude of multitudes only one lucky person whose turn it was, would be quick enough to stretch out his hand and grasp that moment.

A yellow butterfly had alighted on a red bilberry bush, folding its wings into a single leaf: until the sun had warmed it, it would not and could not flit away, and did not even try to fly to safety from my fingers reaching for it.

A black butterfly, like a nun, its wings edged with white, grew numb in the cold dew and before the first sunray could warm it dropped down to the ground, heavy as a piece of iron.

Has anyone ever seen the ice dying in the meadow with the sun beaming down on it? Only yesterday the meadow was like a wide stream, you could see it by the flotsam and jetsam it left behind. The night had been warm, and in the course of it the stream managed to carry off all its water and merge with the big river. The early morning frost made lace out of what remained in the meadow. Very soon the sun tore up all this lace, and each bit of ice died separately, melting into golden drops on the ground.

Yesterday, the bird-cherry trees burst into flower, and everyone, the whole town, carried home armfuls of the white flowers from the forest. I know one tree in that forest: the years it has been fighting for its life, trying to grow as tall as possible out of reach of the

ripping hands. And it has managed to escape: today it is like a palm tree, with not a twig branching off its naked trunk, so that it is even impossible to climb, and high up, at the very top, it has blossomed out. Another tree also tried, but the effort proved too much, it grew sickly, and now all that is left of it are bare sticks.

Sometimes a person comes to the end of his tether in his longing for a mate, but his life simply won't go the way he wants it, the opportunity does not arise for him to get into a deep personal relationship with anyone. With this essential lack he cannot find gratification in any occupation, be it astronomy or chemistry, art or music, because his world will be so sharply divided into his inner and outer world that... Well, sometimes, in the absence of a human soulmate, he will put all his love into a lapdog or something, and the life of this lapdog becomes for him an immeasurably more important fact than the greatest discovery in physics, promising people free food in the future. Is the man who gives his whole human love to a dog blameworthy? Yes, he is. After all, do I not still treasure in my soul the feathers of the blue bird of my youth, my Phacelia?

A RIVER UNDER CLOUDS

In the night some vague thought troubled me, I came outside and saw my thought in the river.

The night before, when the sky was unclouded, this river had been in communion with the stars, with the whole universe. Last night the sky was overcast, and the river lay under the clouds as under a blanket and no longer communed with the universe. And it was then that I recognised my thought about myself in the river, I knew that I was as little to blame as the river if I, like it, could not commune with the whole universe, isolated as I was from it by the dark veils of my longing for the lost Phacelia. That is how I saw the river which, under the dark clouds, could not commune with everyone, but still it remained a river, it glimmered in the darkness, and ran on. And in the darkness under the clouds, the fish, feeling the warmth in nature, splashed much more vigorously and noisily than it had done the night before when the stars shone in the sky and there was a hard frost.

THE PARTING

What a lovely morning! The dew, the mushrooms, the birds... But only it is already autumn. The birches are turning yellow, the tremulous aspen whispers: "There is no relying on poetry:

the dew will dry up, the birds will fly away, the solid mushrooms will disintegrate into rot... Can't rely on anything..." So I must resign myself to this parting, and fly away somewhere together with the leaves.

THE SHOOT

Everything was splendid at this shoot, but the woodcock did not come. And I became immersed in my reminiscences: it was the woodcock that did not come now, and in the remote past it had been she who did not come. She loved me, but it seemed not enough to her to quite answer my strong passion. And she did not come. And I waited in vain and never saw her again.

This was such a lovely evening, with the birds singing and everything, but no woodcock. Two rivulets of water collided in the stream, there was a splash, and nothing more: the water rolled quietly across the spring meadow as before.

But then it turned out that her not coming that time had built up the happiness of my life. This is how it came about: with the years her image became erased little by little, but my love remained and lived in my everlasting search for her image, and I found it in the life phenomena of our whole world, of the whole universe as I studied these phenomena with intimate attention. Thus, in place of one face

everything became like one face, and all my life I feasted my eyes on the features of this infinite face, adding something new to my observations every spring. I was happy, and the only thing I wished for was that everybody should be as happy as I was.

So this explains why my books go on living: they are my own life. And I believe that anyone could do as I have done: he must only try to forget his failures in love and transfer this love to his writing, and he is certain to find readers.

And what I think now is that happiness is irrelevant to whether she came or not, happiness depends only on whether you did love or not, because loving itself is happiness, and this love has a closeness to "talent".

I sat thinking these thoughts until it grew dark, and suddenly I realised that the woodcock would not be coming at all. A stabbing pain pierced my heart, and I whispered: "Oh you hunter, you hunter, why didn't you hold her fast that time?"

ARISHA'S QUESTION

When that woman left me, Arisha asked: "And who is her husband?"

"I don't know," I said. "I didn't ask. Anyway, what do I care who her husband is."

"I like that! You were sitting and talking with her all that time, and you don't know who her husband is! I'd have certainly asked."

The next time she came, I remembered Arisha's question, but again I did not ask her who her husband was. I did not ask her because something in her appealed to me, it must have been her eyes which made me think of Phacelia, the love of my youth. Be that as it may, what I liked in her was exactly the same thing that I once liked in Phacelia: she did not arouse in me any thought of intimacy, rather my interest in her rejected anything mundane. Her husband, her family, her home were no business of mine.

When she rose to go, it suddenly occurred to me that I ought to breathe some fresh air after my hard working day, and perhaps walk her home. It was frosty outside. The black river was shivering, whiffs of stream ran this way and that, and a rustling came from the ice forming along the water's edge. The water looked so frightening, so abysmally deep that one fancied that even the unhappiest of mortals who had decided to drown himself would take one look into that black abyss and return home gladly, lighting a samovar and whispering: "Drowning—what a silly idea! It's even worse there than here. Here at least I can have some nice hot tea."

"Do you have a sense of Nature?" I asked my new Phacelia.

"What is it?" she asked.

She was an educated woman, she must have read and heard a hundred times about a sense of Nature. Yet, her question was so simple, so

sincere. And I did not doubt for a minute that she really did not know what it was.

"But then how could she know if she, this Phacelia of mine, may well be Nature herself," I thought.

The thought was staggering.

I wanted to look once more with this new understanding into her dear eyes, and through them deep into Nature, ever desirable, ever virginal, ever reproductive.

But it had grown quite dark, the flight of my great feeling rebounded from the darkness, and came back to earth. Some second nature of mine had posed Arisha's question before me.

We were walking along a large cast-iron bridge, and just as I opened my mouth to put Arisha's question to my wonderful Phacelia, I heard the pounding of cast-iron feet behind me. I did not want to turn round and see who was that giant striding behind us. I knew who it was: it was the Commander's Statue, the power punishing me for the barrenness of the dream of my youth, my poetic dream which once again was my substitute for genuine human love.

And when he came level with me, he barely touched me, but I went flying over the railing into the black abyss.

I came to my senses in my bed and thought: "No, Arisha's mundane question was not as silly as I thought it. If, in my youth, I had not substituted a dream for love, I would not have lost my Phacelia, and now, years later, I would not have had this black-abyss nightmare."

ABYSS

When someone says that a look into an abyss makes him want to jump down, it means that he is a strong man, that he can stand on the edge of an abyss and resist the tug. The weak are not drawn to an abyss, they are flung far back to safe shores.

An abyss is a test of strength for all living things, a strength for which there is no substitute.

THE FORK

Three roads run from the post; each road is disastrous in a different way, but the same death is in store at the end. Luckily, I am going not where the road forks out, but coming back from the opposite direction to the post where the disastrous roads converge. I'm glad of the post, and I return home along the only true road, and at the fork I recollect my misfortunes.

A DROP AND A STONE

The ice is solid under the window, but the sun is shining warmly, icicles have formed on the eaves, and a spring-time dripping has begun. "Help! Help! Help! " rings every drop as it dies: its life lasts a fraction of a second. "Help! " is a cry born of the agony of helplessness.

A small hole has now been bored in the ice, it is melting, it is no more, but the ringing drops go on falling and falling.

As a drop falls on a stone it clearly cries "Help! " The stone is big and strong, it will lie here for a thousand years perhaps, but a drop lives only for a moment, and that moment is an agony of helplessness. But still, as the saying goes: "A drop of water will hollow stone", and the many drops merge into a strength so mighty that they will not only hollow a stone but even carry it off in a turbulent stream.

THE GRAMOPHONE

Losing my love was so terribly hard to bear, that people began to notice the torment I was suffering. The wife of my landlord noticed it too, and asked me gently what was causing me such distress. She was the first person to display such sincere sympathy, and I told her everything about Phacelia.

"Oh, I'll cure you in a moment," she said, and told me to bring her gramophone into the garden. There were a great many flowering lilac shrubs there. Also, a large space had been sown with phacelia, and the bright-blue flowering meadow was simply a-buzz with bees. The kind woman brought a record, put it on, and Sobinov, a famous tenor of the day, sang the aria of Lensky. She watched me raptly, ready to help me in any way she could. Love

flowered in the singer's every word, it was suffused with the honey of the phacelia and scented with lilac.

A great number of years have passed since then. But every time I happen to hear the aria of Lensky somewhere, it all comes back to me: the bees, the blue phacelia, the lilac, and my kind landlady. I did not realise it then, but I know it now that she really did cure me of my hopeless anguish, and when I hear people speaking scathingly of the gramophone which only caters to low tastes—I keep my own counsel.

A ZEST FOR LIFE

A man came to see me, he called himself a "reader", he seemed upset and asked me to tell him a word that might save his life.

"Words are your craft after all," he said. "And judging by your writings you know the word I need. Tell me."

I told him that I did not keep such words to myself for an emergency, and if I knew any I'd tell him.

He would not take "no" for an answer. He was so upset that he actually wept. And when, on his way out, he saw the bundle with his leather boots in the front hall, he wept even harder. He told me that he left home wearing felt boots but had taken along his leather ones in case of thaw.

"Why, doesn't it mean that I haven't quite

lost my zest for life if I thought of spring and thaw?" he said.

And all at once I remembered how I myself had once stifled the despair of my loss with a similar expectation of spring, and how many words of comfort this inspired me to afterwards, and how my spirit rejoiced. I do know words of comfort, I've written them down, only it was a bad reader that came my way.

I remembered some words then and told them to this stranger as best I could.

GOETHE WAS WRONG

The first time I noticed that the orioles sing in different keys I remembered what Goethe said about Nature creating the impersonal, and only man being personal. No, I think that only man is capable of creating completely impersonal mechanisms along with spiritual values, whereas in Nature everything is personal, even its very laws: even these laws are changeable in animate nature. And so even Goethe was not right about everything.

A NUPTIAL DREAM

It was a quiet sunny morning. The pre-dawn frost had tidied everything up, dried, smoothed and nipped things where necessary, but the sun very quickly made a mess of what it had

accomplished, it went all out and little bubbles began to appear on the tips of the grass blades here and there.

I do not know and I do not want to know the name of the tree on which I saw those dear tufty buds, but at that moment all the springs I had lived through became for me as one, as one love, and the whole of Nature appeared to me as a nuptial dream.

Early spring takes me back to the day from which all my dreams began. For a long time I thought that my keen sense of Nature had been with me since I first came in touch with Nature as a child. But now I know very well that my sense of Nature takes its beginning from an encounter with someone.

It began long ago, in my youth, when I was in a strange land and when it occurred to me for the first time that perhaps I should give up my love for Phacelia, when I was in such pain that my very soul cried out if I touched my body with a finger, and at the same time I saw a great world of joy revealed to me instead. It seemed so easy to replace my pain of losing Phacelia with the joy of participating in blessed, beautiful human toil. It was then that I remembered and recognised myself as a child in Nature. Away from home, my Motherland appeared to me in all her enchanting strength, and then my first encounter with Nature rose vividly before me and my own people in my own land seemed beautiful to me.

A FIELD MOUSE

In flood-time, a field mouse swam for a long time in search of land. Utterly worn out, at long last it saw a shrub protruding from the water, and climbed on to the top branches. Until then this field mouse had lived like all field mice, watching the others, doing as they did, and living. And now it had to think for itself. When evening came a crimson sunray lit up the forehead of the field mouse as if it were a human forehead, its ordinary beady black eyes flared up with a red fire, and in them flared up the purpose of the existence of this poor mouse, abandoned by everyone, this particular mouse who had come only this once into the world and would leave it forever if it did not find some way to save itself; and countless generations of field mice to come would never again produce its exact replica.

In my youth I experienced something like this field mouse. I, too, had been at the mercy of the elements, only in my case it was love, not flood water. I had lost my Phacelia then, but my misfortune made me understand something, and when the love-flood receded, I came to people—the solid land that saved my life—and brought them my message of love.

BIRCHES

New grass pushes up through rotting leaves and dry grass; those rotting leaves have been alive once, the grass has been alive, and now, having lived well, they pass into the new green life as fertilizer. It's frightening to imagine yourself as one of them, and to comprehend your worth in this natural transformation. Whatever I take a fancy to, be it a leaf, grass, or those two young birch twins, I am unable to correlate the things I have picked out, no more than myself for that matter, to the fertilizing worth of their predecessors.

The birch twins I have picked out are still very young, only as tall as a man, and they grow close together as one tree. While there are no leaves and only the buds swollen like round beads, the fine network of the slender branches can be seen in all its delicacy against the sky. For several years in a row, during the movement of sap, I have been admiring this graceful network, noticing how many new twigs have been added, and pondering on the life story of this very complex being, a tree, which is like a whole kingdom united by the rule of the trunk. I see much that is wonderful in these birches, and I very often think of the Tree which exists independently of me and yet expands my own soul on closer contact.

The evening is chilly and I am a bit out of sorts. Today my "divinations" about the soul of the Tree seem no better than aesthetic ravings:

I poeticise birches and discover a soul in them whereas in actual fact there is nothing...

And suddenly, out of a perfectly clear sky, a drop fell on my face. I thought a bird must have flown past, and craned my neck to see, but there were no birds in sight, and another drop fell on my face out of the blue. And then I saw that there was a broken branch high up on the birch-tree under which I was standing, and drips of sap were falling down on my face from the wound.

My spirits revived, and I went back in thought to my birches, and remembered a friend who saw a Madonna in the woman he loved. However, when he came to know her better, he was disillusioned, and called the feeling he once had for her an abstraction of sexual love. I had often thought about this from different angles, and now that dripping birch sap gave a new direction to my thoughts about that friend and his Madonna.

"Some men do not do like my friend," I was thinking. "Like me they never part with their Phacelia, they carry her in their heart, they do something together with everyone else, yet hide their love from everyone."

And again that evening I saw that my birch twins had a soul of their own, for where there is love, there is a soul, whether in a woman or a birch tree. Such was the effect of the dripping sap.

AUTUMN LEAVES

The first frost comes just before sunrise. Tremulously, I wait to see what is going to happen in the forest glade. Invisible forest creatures arrive in the early morning twilight and spread white linens all over the grass. But the very first rays of the sun do away with the linens and green patches appear on the white. Little by little the white disappears completely, and only small wedges of it still cling on in the shade of trees and hummocks.

One can't tell what is going on in the blue sky, glimpsed through the golden trees. What is it—leaves borne away on the wind, or little birds gathering in flocks and flying to far-away, warm climes?

The wind keeps a sharp eye on what is his: in the course of the summer it pays a visit everywhere, even the most impenetrable thickets, and there is not a leaf he overlooks, and when autumn comes he reaps his harvest.

Falling, the leaves whisper goodbye forever. With them it is always like that: once you have broken away it's goodbye, you must perish.

Again I remembered Phacelia, and on that autumn day my heart overflowed with joy as if it were spring, I felt as if I broke away from her like a leaf, but I am not a leaf, I am a man. And perhaps that's how it had to be for me: breaking away from her, losing her, had perhaps made the beginning of my real closeness with the entire human world.

TREES IN THRALL

With its top whorl the tree collected the snow into a ball so huge that the crown began to bend under the weight. There was a thaw, and another snowfall, and the snow stuck to the ball, the weight caused the tree to arch more and more until the crown sank into the snow below and remained anchored thus till spring. All that winter, wild beasts and occasional skiers passed under that arch. The proud fir trees looked down on the bent birch, much like people born to rule look down on their subjects.

In the spring, the birch straightened up to stand beside the fir trees, and if it had not been bent throughout that especially snowy winter it would have stood as straight as the firs summer and winter afterwards, but because it had once bent so low it could not withstand the lightest snowfall, and every winter without fail it leaned over the path in an arch.

Going into a young forest on a snowy winter is really frightening sometimes, and often impossible. Where you walked along a wide path in the summer you find bent trees arching across it, and some of them so low that only a hare could slip through under them. But I know one simple magic trick that saves me the trouble of ducking or doubling over. I get myself a nice, hefty stick, hit hard on a bent tree, the snow comes falling down at once, the tree springs up and lets me pass. Thus I walk slowly

through the forest and with my magic wand release numberless trees from thralldom.

LIVE SMOKE

In Moscow last night I woke up and guessed the time from the whiff of smoke I saw through my window: it was the hour preceding dawn. This whiff of smoke, rising straight up from the chimney of somebody's house like a hazy column was barely discernible in the darkness. And there was not a living soul about, just this whiff of live smoke, and my heart stirred like this smoke, and my whole soul strove skyward with it in the perfect silence. Pressing my forehead to the window, I remained alone with it for a while in that pre-dawn hour.

STRUGGLE FOR LIFE

It is the time when birches shed the last of their gold on the firs and the slumbering anthills. I notice even the glitter of the needles in the light of the setting sun, and I walk on and on along the forest path, feasting my eyes on all I see, and in my imagination the forest becomes a wide sea, the forest edge—a seashore, and the glade—an island. There are several firs growing close together on that island, and I sit down to rest at their foot. It is high up in the trees that life is at its busiest, I discover.

There, in the wealth of cones, a bustling activity is carried on by a squirrel, several crossbills, and probably many other creatures, unknown to me, as well. Down below, under the firs, on the black ground all is gloom and quiet, and you can only see the husks flying.

If you observe the life of all these creatures with intelligent attention and sympathy, you'll find it as interesting as reading a fascinating book; take these seeds falling to the ground as the crossbills and squirrels shell the cones. Once upon a time a seed fell down between the bared roots of a birch and, protected from the burning sun and freezing cold by the tree, it sprouted and grew, pushing its way down between the birch's bared roots, encountered more roots underneath, and found no room there for its own. And then it lifted its young roots above the birch's, skirted them and plunged into the ground on the other side. And now this fir has grown taller than the birch, and stands beside it with their roots interwoven.

MOVEMENT

There was a flowering meadow beside the dried-up pond. I leaned my bicycle against a tree and sat down on a fallen trunk to collect my thoughts after the ride. Movement unsettles you so much that thoughts are not quickly collected. With a motorcar you gain real command of it—not in that you have learnt to

drive but that you have learnt to maintain your inner quiet however fast the movement. Because the quieter you are yourself, the better you notice and appreciate the movement of life.

A FULL-FLOWING RIVER

It is unambiguously said in Goethe that the finest thoughts a person voices when contemplating Nature come from his own mind. Why is it then that when you come to a full-flowing river with such a shallow little soul, all in bits and pieces from a family quarrel, you only have to glance at the big river and your very soul also becomes big, and you have magnanimously forgiven everything?

A SHEPHERD'S REED

The days are becoming very hot, but the dew is still copious and cool. Cattle are now driven to pasture early in the morning and brought home at noon when the gadflies become a menace. The sound of a shepherd's reed somehow finds its way into every home, and reaches every sleeping soul.

Today the melody reached my soul, and I thought it might be possible for me to be satisfied with a perfectly simple life in which genuine kindness would come without any effort, merely as a direct consequence of that

life. And I would associate with my fellow-men because one wants to talk to someone and also to fondle children. There'd be no special approaches or scheming, everything would happen naturally: what a person wants from his fellow-man is attention, not money.

POOR THOUGHTS

The days grew suddenly warmer. Petya got busy fishing. He set a net for carp in the peaty pond, and for a landmark remembered that there were ten small birches standing together on the shore exactly opposite his net. The setting sun was plump and big. Petya lay down to sleep amidst the croaking of the frogs, the trilling of the nightingales, and all the other delights of a noisy "tropical" night.

Only it sometimes happens that when things couldn't be better, poor thoughts come to a poor person and do not give him a chance to relish the happiness of a "tropical" night. The thought that came to Petya was that someone had spied on him and pinched his net, like the year before. At daybreak he went to see and, true enough, there were some people standing where he had set his net. He rushed there, fuming with anger and ready to fight against ten men for his net, and suddenly stopped short and smiled: what he had mistaken for people were the ten little birch trees wich had broken into leaf overnight.

SINGING DOORS

Watching the bees flying there and back in the sunlight—there flying light, and back with a burden of pollen, I can easily picture a world of people and things, such well-coordinated and lived-with things that they sing like the doors in Gogol's "Old-World Landowners".

When in a bee-garden I always remember what those old-world gentlefolk meant for Gogol: those funny old people with their singing doors gave Gogol the illusion that harmonious and perfect love between people was possible in this world.

CIRCULUS VITIOSUS

There was a time when it amazed me that bald-headed men were not ashamed of living, when I wondered why they bothered to distribute the remaining long hairs at the back of the head with such care over their bald scalp, sticking them down rather securely with something. Oh those bald, paunchy men in tails, those old maids with sallow cheeks wearing diamonds and velvet! Weren't they ashamed to appear in broad daylight and dress up in posh clothes? Twenty, thirty years passed, and I was compelled to comb my hair forward, and then someone saw through the ruse and said to me: you have such a good forehead, and such a splendid bald dome, why cover it up? And little

by little I quite reconciled myself to my baldness. And all my other defects... I even reconciled myself to the loss of my springtime Phacelia. The bald, the paunchy, the sallow, and the ill no longer trouble my imagination, and it is only the people who will write without a glimmering of talent that I can't yet take in my stride. But then I imagine that talent, too, is like hair: talent might pass, you won't feel like writing any more, and you'll reconcile yourself to this too. After all, talent is not something that you created yourself, it simply grew in you, like thick hair and, like hair, it will thin out, and you'll have "written yourself out". The point is not in having talent but in keeping command of it. Now that is something that must not be lost, the loss would be irretrievable: it's not baldness or paunchiness, it's myself. And while *I myself* exist it's silly weeping over what I have lost. There's the saying: "When heads roll, hair is not mourned", and it can be re-phrased as follows: "So long as you've a head on your shoulders, never mind the baldness."

A PARTING AND A MEETING

With delight I watched the beginning of a stream of water. A tree grew on a rise—a very tall fir. Raindrops from the branches collected on the trunk, they merged, jumped along the bends in the trunk and mostly vanished in the thick pale-green lichen that covered it. At the

very bottom there was a curve in the tree, and the raindrops seeping from under the lichen fell straight down from here into a still puddle with bursting bubbles on it. There were also raindrops falling into the puddle from different branches, each falling with a different sound.

Before my very eyes this small pool under the tree burst its bounds and a stream of water, under snow, rushed down to the road which now formed a sort of dam. The newborn stream was so powerful that it tore through this "dam" and raced down to the river. The alder thickets on the river bank were flooded, and drops fell from every branch, starting a great number of bubbles on the water. And all these bubbles, moving slowly to the stream, were suddenly swept up to rush along the river together with the foam.

Some birds flying past showed through the mist every other minute, but I could not tell what they were. I heard their piping voices but I could not identify them through the roar of the river. I saw them alighting on a group of trees near the water's edge, and so I went there to see who had arrived so early from the warm lands.

I heard the song of a finch. I could not believe my ears at first, but soon I realised that those birds I'd seen through the mist, those early comers were all finches. Thousands of finches came on and on, all of them singing, alighting on trees and scattering over the ploughland. My strongest feeling when I saw all those dear

birds was fear—fear that if there were fewer of them I would have in all likelihood missed them altogether.

"Today I'll miss a finch, tomorrow I'll miss a good man and he'll perish without my noticing him," I thought. I realised that in this abstractness of mine lay the beginning of some big, fundamental delusion.

PHACELIA'S DAUGHTER

Many years passed since I lost sight of her completely. I could not have recognised her now, for her facial features had become quite blurred in my memory. Only her eyes, like two northern stars, I would have known her eyes, of course.

One day I happened to go into a commission store; there I found the thing I wanted and bought it. I stood in line to pay for my purchase; there was a second line alongside, formed by people who had only large banknotes, and the cashier was short of change. A young woman from that second line asked me if I could change five rubles for her, as the thing she bought cost only two. All I had in small notes was two rubles, but I readily offered them to her.

I suppose she did not understand that I simply wanted to give her the money, as a gift. Or else she was such a dear that, vanquishing her sense of false shame, she wanted to be above conventional pettiness. Alas, as I held the money out to her I looked at her and suddenly recog-

nised those eyes, two northern stars exactly like Phacelia's. In that fleeting moment I looked deep into her soul through her eyes, and the thought flashed across my mind that she might be *her* daughter.

After the way I stared it was impossible for her to take the money from me. Or it may be that it only struck her then that I, a total stranger, wanted to make her a gift of the money. Money, indeed! A mere two rubles. I held them out to her, but she said:

"No, I can't take it from you just like that."

And I, as I recognised those eyes, I was prepared to give her everything I had, at a word from her I'd run somewhere and bring more, and more...

I looked at her beseechingly, like the humblest of paupers, and begged:

"Do take it..."

"No," she repeated.

I must have looked utterly miserable, woebegone and forlorn, because suddenly understanding came to her, she smiled Phacelia's smile, and said:

"This is what we'll do: you take my five rubles and give me your two. Alright?"

I agreed with delight, and I could see that she understood my delight in the right spirit.

AN OLD LIME TREE

I was thinking about that old lime tree with such a wrinkled bark. It had been a comfort to

its old master for so many years and was now a comfort to me, and yet it never gave us a thought. It served people so disinterestedly, and as I looked at it hope burgeoned in me that perhaps one day I, too, would come into flower together with it.

JOY

Sorrow, accumulating in one's heart, may one fine day burst into flames like a haystack, and everything will burn away in the fire of extraordinary joy.

VICTORY

My friend, if you have been defeated there's no place for you either in the North or in the South, because for a defeated man all Nature is a field on which he has lost his battle. But when you have won a victory, and only the desolate swamps have alone witnessed your victory, then even these swamps will blossom forth in fabulous beauty and spring will always be yours, always spring, glory to victory.

THE LAST SPRING

This may be my last spring. But then, of course, every person, young and old alike, must think that every spring may be his last

and he'll never see another. This thought makes the joy of watching spring a hundred thousand times bigger, and every small thing, if it's just a finch, or even a word brought by the breeze from somewhere, appears unique, declaring its right to exist and participate in the joy of spring, also their last.

ONLY A DAY

In autumn, of course, there's whispering all round that goodbyes must be said very soon, but on a radiant sunny noon a sprightly counterpoint runs through the whispering: even if it's only a day, it's mine! And I am thinking that perhaps our whole life passes as one day, and the whole of life's wisdom boils down to the same thing: we've only our one life, like the only sunny day in autumn, and even if it only lasts a day, it's ours!

THE CUCKOO

I had sat down to rest on a fallen birch, and a cuckoo did not notice me and alighted almost beside me. With a sort of catch in its throat, as if to try and see what would happen, it gave voice.

"That's one," I said, from force of habit beginning to count the number of years I was left to live.

"Two! "

And just as I was going to say "three" after the cuckoo had cried "cu", it suddenly took wing, without finishing the "cu-ckoo".

So it wasn't three years for me. I didn't mind that it was not very much, I'd lived long enough, but what I would mind was this: supposing I spent these two-odd years getting ready for some huge effort and, just as I started, the finishing "ckoo" would suddenly sound, it would be all over for me!

Why bother to get ready then?

It wasn't worth the trouble.

But when I got up to go and cast a last look at the birch I had been sitting on, the doubt evaporated from my soul at once: this wonderful fallen tree was opening its leaf buds for its last spring, for just this one spring!

THE SMILING LAND

In big mountains, as in the Caucasus, traces remain everywhere of titanic battles fought and upheavals suffered in the life of the earth's crust, that are like grimaces of horror and agony on a human face. There, before your very eyes, water cuts mountains in two, rocks fall and crumble with time. Perhaps a battle like that had also been fought once in our Moscow region, only it must have been very long ago, and the elemental forces had been subdued so thoroughly by water that in time the land began to smile with its green wooded hills.

As my eyes roam over these dear hills I, remembering my past, sometimes think: "No, I don't want a repetition, I don't want to be young again! " And, smiling together with the land, I feel a glad relief, I don't know why.

SUNLIGHT IN THE FOREST

The forest is so thick that you cannot see the sun at once, you can only guess from the fiery spots and arrows that it is over there, hiding behind a big, tall tree, and shooting its first slanting rays into the thickets from there.

When you step into the dark forest straight from a sunlit glade it's like entering a cave, but in a little while you love it. It is impossible to put into words how lovely it can be in a dark forest on a bright, sunny day. You simply can't help giving complete freedom to your thought, usually tied down by various mundane cares. Delighted, your thought will fly from one sun spot to another, on the way it will suddenly stop to embrace a slender young fir standing in the middle of the sunlit glade, as straight as a toy tower, and then it will be lured by the whiteness of a birch, and like an innocent little girl will hide its blushing face in its green and fly on, flashing up in the sunrays, from one glade to the other.

THE OLD STARLING

The starlings had long been fledged and had flown away, and sparrows had already taken possession of their wooden house. But on fine dewy mornings the old starling still comes to the same apple tree and sings.

Isn't it strange, when everything has long been over, the eggs hatched, the fledglings grown into big birds and gone? Why then does the old starling come every morning to the apple tree where his springtime passed, and sing?

I marvel at the old starling, and, listening to his awkward, funny song, I myself begin to nurse some vague hope and sometimes also try to compose something.

A SMALL BIRD

A small bird, the smallest, perched on the top branch of the tallest fir, and it was obvious that it had perched there for a purpose: to sing glory to the dawn, like the big birds. It opened and shut its tiny beak, but the sound did not reach the earth; however, the look of it said quite eloquently: "My job is to sing glory to the dawn and not to glorify myself, so it does not worry me that my song does not reach the ground! "

FLOWERING SWEETBRIER

It must have been in spring that the sweetbrier stole up to the young asp, and when the time came for the tree to celebrate its birthday it burst into flower with fragrant, red wild roses. Bees and wasps and bumble-bees came humming to the birthday party to have a drink of dew and take a drop of honey home.

PLUMP, SMUG BUBBLES

A sultry, rainy day. The blue titmouse no longer called as before in his mating voice in the warm sun. His voice now rang without a pause, and he actually seemed to have wasted away from the strain, and looked so thin, sitting on that branch. And the crow did not even want to get up on a tree, and gave his mating calls right there on the road, bowing, choking, wheezing and panting from desire.

The spring of water had started swiftly that year. In the open the snow became flaccid and one could walk on it, gliding as on skis. Placid puddles had formed round the firs in the forest. Out in the open the quickly falling rain would not let any bubbles rise on the puddles, but here, under the firs, the drops falling from the branches were slow and heavy, and each one produced a plump, smug bubble as it hit the water. I love those bubbles, they make me think of babies who look like both their parents at once.

MY DEAR OLD SAMOVAR

Sometimes there is such quiet, such lucidity in your soul. You look at people so attentively, and if the person is beautiful you admire him, if he is ugly you pity him. And in every single object you feel the soul of the person who made it.

Here I am lighting my samovar which has served me for thirty years, and I take care that my dear old samovar should not shed a tear when it comes to the boil.

RHYTHM

A constant desire for rhythm is part of my nature. On days when I happen to get up early and go out into the dewy morning I love it so much that I instantly decide that I must do it every morning. Why every morning? Because every wave follows another wave...

WATER

In Nature, nothing can become as still as water, and a man can only become as still before a glorious, radiant dawn: quietly absorbedly he reaches deep into himself where there is a channel into the world of universal kinship, scoops some life-restoring water and returns to our human world, and here he encounters the

radiant stillness of the water, expansive, colourful and vast.

YOUNG LEAVES

Firs flower in red candles and shed a fine yellow dust. I sat down on the ground beside a great old stump. It was all rotten inside and would have probably fallen apart if the hard outer shell had not split into staves, and each stave had not leaned against the rot and held it together. A birch tree had grown out of that rot and now it has broken into leaf. And a multitude of different flowering berry grasses cluster round this great old stump.

The old tree stump held me there, I was sitting beside the young birch and strained to hear the murmur of its tremulous little leaves, but I did not hear anything. The wind, you see, was rather strong and the firs carried to me the music of the forest which came in far-spaced yet powerful waves. When a wave receded far away, the sound-screen would drop, complete silence would reign for a brief minute, and a finch would quickly take advantage of it, bursting into vigorous, determined song. It was a joy listening to it, it made you realise how good it was to be alive! But what I wanted to hear was the whispering of my birch tree's pale yellow, fragrantly shiny and very young little leaves. Alas, they were still at such a tender age that they only trembled, shone, smelt, but did not rustle.

AROUND AN OLD TREE STUMP

It is never empty in the forest, and if you think it is you have only yourself to blame.

Perfect peace and quiet surrounds the great old stumps of old dead trees; hot sunrays fall on them through the branches, and everything around takes warmth from the old stump, grows and moves, the stump sprouts grass and all kinds of flowers. I counted ten grasshoppers, two lizards, six large flies and two carabuses basking in the sun on just one hot spot on the stump... Tall ferns have gathered round it, the softest breath of a wind blustering somewhere invades their peace very, very rarely, and when it does, a whispering begins among the ferns, one leaning close to the other, and a discussion ensues.

BESIDE A STREAM

The birches have long been wearing their leafy garb and the grass has grown tall round them, but when I took a picture of them it had been early spring, and the first little brook had just appeared under the trees, darkling on the blue snow. Since then, while the birches were dressing up in their finery and all those various grasses with their vari-coloured ears, buttons and pods were sprouting round them, much, very much water flowed through that stream, and the stream itself has become so choked

with dark-green, impenetrable sedge that I do not know if there is even a drop of water left in it. And it was exactly the same with me at the time: so much water has flowed away since we parted, and from the way I look no one would think that the stream of my soul is still alive.

THE SONG OF WATER

The spring of water gathers together all related sounds, and sometimes you can't tell if what you're hearing is the babbling of water, the muttering of black grouse, or the gurgling of frogs. Everything is blended into a single song of water, and above it, in agreement with everything, bleats a snipe, and in accord with the water wheezes a woodcock and a bittern gives its strange booming cry. And all these peculiar birdsongs have emerged from the song of the spring water.

THE AEOLIAN HARP

The long tree roots, hanging close together from under the edge of the steep bank, have been stretching and stretching like strings in the dark overhang and have, at last, reached the water. And when a breeze, even the gentlest of springtime breezes, ruffles the water and the tiny waves reach the tips of the hanging roots,

stirring them and making them knock against one another, the sound is like the first sound of spring, the aeolian harp.

THE FIRST FLOWER

I thought that a chance puff of wind had touched an old leaf, but this was the first butterfly flying out. I thought I was imagining things, for the butterfly turned out to be the first flower peeping shyly out.

TO AN UNKNOWN FRIEND

This bright dewy morning is like an undiscovered land, like an unexplored stratum of the sky, it's such a unique morning, no one has risen yet, no one has seen anything, and you yourself are seeing it all for the first time.

The nightingales are singing the last of their springtime songs, some dandelions have survived in sheltered places, and somewhere in the shadowy dampness there may still be a few lilies-of-the-valley. Some summer birds—the wrens, and especially the orioles with their flute-like singing—have decided to help out the nightingales. Everywhere you can hear the restless chatter of blackbirds. And over there a woodpecker, exhausted by the job of finding worms for his young, has perched on a branch a good distance away from them, simply to rest.

Get up, unknown friend! Gather the rays of your happiness into a bunch, be brave, start fighting, help the sun! You hear, even the cuckoo wants to help you! See that hen-harrier sailing over the water: it's not an ordinary hen-harrier, this morning it's unique, and now look at those magpies, glistening with dew drops, as they emerge on to the path. Tomorrow they won't glisten exactly like this, and the day will be different too—these magpies will come out onto the path in some other place. This morning is the only one of its kind, no one in the whole wide world has ever seen it before, you are seeing it now, only you and your unknown friend.

For thousands and thousands of years people have been living on earth, saving up and passing down their joy to one another, so that you should come, gather it up in bunches, and rejoice. Be brave then, be brave!

And again my soul expands! All those firs and birches, I can't tear my eyes away from the green cones on the pines and the red ones on the firs. All those firs and birches, it's all too good to be true!

THE TOP WHORL

Yesterday's snow still lay on the ground this morning. The sun came out, a cold northern wind started up and all that day lowering clouds raced across the sky, now revealing the sun,

now hiding it again, and threatening...

But in the forest, shielded from the wind, vernal life went on unconcerned.

There is something fabulous in the forest when the as yet bare branches hang down from different levels and intertwine, some with pretty catkins, some with long green, taut leaf buds.

The bird-cherry trees put out small twists of green, the elders—a red, hairy pulp, and in the early pussy-willow tiny yellow flowers sprout from under its old fuzzy catkins, very much like a yellow chick that has just been hatched.

Even the trunks of the not very old firs have become covered with a woolly green of young needles, and on the very top you can clearly see the beginning of a new whorl.

I am not trying to say that we, complex, grown-up people, should go back to our childhood, what I mean is that we should each of us cherish the child in ourselves, never forget about its existence and build our life like a tree: it always holds its first baby whorl aloft, in the light, and the trunk which upholds and gives it strength, it's us, grown-ups.

A WHEAT SEED

Even Shakespeare's power of imagination does not repress me as a writer any more. I know very well that if I could, without any

imagination and simply by patient digging, find in myself a grain of something that all people live by and relate it in words, Shakespeare himself would invite me like a brother to his hunting castle, and it would never occur to him to counterpose the great might of his talent to the tiny wheat seed of my faith in a human affinity.

SECRET LIFE

Once, a long time ago, someone had lived on this green forest glade. Over there, earth had been heaped up, here a hole had been dug in the ground: the house must have stood over there, and the cellar had been here, and from the deep-green stripe across the glade you can guess that once there had been a road here on which walked a long-dead someone.

I walk along that deep-green stripe and feel that something might cause such a change in my feelings and notions, that such strange things might happen to me that I'll recognise that long-dead person in myself; I'll know how he walked along his road then and how he is walking through the thick grass now as myself.

And when this man was resurrected in me I saw, under a huge oak, the dark outline of another tree, as huge, on the bright green grass. I stood in thought for a moment, and then it dawned on me that the two trees had been growing side by side for many long years, and

then one of them fell, decayed, and became fertilizer for the lush grass that shows its outline in dark green.

THE CONSECRATION OF LEAF-BUDS

Leaf-buds, chocolate coloured with tiny green tails, open up, and from each green tip hangs a large clear drop. You break off one leaf-bud, rub it between your fingers and for a long time afterwards your fingers will smell of birch or poplar pitch, or else of the specially memorable fragrance of bird-cherry trees. You will remember how you used to climb those trees for the shiny black berries, how you ate them in handfuls, seeds and all, and how they never did you harm, only gave you pleasure.

The evening was so warm and still that you waited for something tensely: surely something had to happen in that stillness. And there it came: the trees began whispering together, a white birch had something to say to another white birch far away, a young asp tree, standing in the middle of the clearing like a slender green candle, found a friend of the same age, and a bird-cherry tree held out a branch with open leaf-buds on it to a close neighbour. And so, if we are to compare them to us we'll see that whereas we communicate in sounds, they use their fragrance. At this time of the year, each variety of tree is surrounded by its own fragrance.

When it began to grow dark, the leaf-buds could no longer be seen but the drops on their tips shone, and even when nothing could be made out at all in the dark thickets of the bushes, you could see the drops shining, just the drops and the sky: these drops drew their light from the sky and shone for us in the dark forest.

I felt as if I were one of those pitchy leaf-buds, and I wanted to open up for my one and only unknown friend, a friend so wonderful that just the eagerness of my anticipation reduced to dust all the obstacles in my progress.

A FOREST STREAM

If you want to understand the soul of the forest, find a stream and walk along the bank, either with or against the current, it does not matter.

As I walk along my favourite stream in very early spring this is what I see, hear and think.

In one shallow place the water, coming up against a barrier of fir-tree roots, gurgles as it collides with the roots and spreads bubbles. These bubbles rush on and some burst at once, but most of them gather into a snow-white ball, visible from afar, at the next obstacle.

The water encounters more and more obstacles, but it is none the worse for it and only gathers into runnels, as if it were tensing its muscles for an unavoidable struggle.

The ripples on the water cast a shadowy reflection on the trunk of the fir and on the grass, the shadows run along the other tree trunks, over grass, and a sound is born in this rippling, and one fancies that the grasses are rising to music, and there is a harmony in the shadows.

From the wide, shallow pool the water falls into a narrow hollow and it's because of this noiseless fall that one fancies that the water has tensed its muscles, the sun picks up a reflection of the movement and the tensed shadows of the rivulets run up the tree trunks and along the grass.

And now the water comes to a large obstruction, and you can hear it murmuring and splashing from afar. But there is no weakness, no complaining, and no despair in the sound, water does not know these human emotions, and each rivulet is confident that it will reach freedom, and even if it encounters a mountain, a mountain as tall as Elbrus, it will cut the mountain in two and sooner or later reach its destination.

Meanwhile, the shadow, thin as smoke, from the reflected ripples on the water goes running up the trees and along the grasses, and to the sound of the stream the leaf-buds open and the grasses rise from under the water and on the dry banks.

And here is a pool of stagnant water with a fallen tree in it, the water gently rippling from the darting of shiny little water-striders.

To the sound of the water's restrained murmur, the rivulets roll on confidently, and as they meet and flow together they call out to one another and chatter in their joy.

The water touches the buds of newborn yellow flowers and they give a start to new ripples. Thus, the life of the stream passes now as bubbles, now as foam, now as joyful chatter amid flowers and dancing shadows.

A tree has long fallen across the stream, it is there to stay and has even turned green from old age, but the water has quickly found a way under the tree, and gushes out, gurgling and rippling with tremulous shadows.

Some grasses have long emerged from the water, and now they keep nodding to the stream running past and to the tremulous shadows it casts.

Never mind if there is an obstruction to surmount, never mind! Obstacles make life; if it was not for them, the water would seep away from the inert stream into the ocean at once, the way enigmatic life goes from a dead body.

Along its way the stream comes to a wide hollow. Filling it generously with water, it runs on, leaving the pool to live a life of its own.

A spreading shrub, bent by the weight of that winter's snows, has now lowered a great number of branches into the water and saddled the stream like a gray spider, dangling all its long legs.

Fir and aspen seeds are floating on the water.

The whole passage of the stream through the forest has been a lengthy struggle, with its own count of time. And as the struggle goes on, in its lengthiness life is engendered, and also my awareness of it.

Indeed, if not for those obstacles at every step, the water would go away at once, and there would be no lifetime at all...

In its struggle the stream has to make an effort, its rivulets become twisted like muscles, but there is no doubt at all that sooner or later the stream will reach the ocean, the free water, and this "sooner or later" is its time count, its very life.

The rivulets call to each other, straining as the banks hem them in, and babbling their "sooner or later". And all day and all night long the babble of their "sooner or later" can be heard. And until the last drop of water runs away, until the stream dries up, the water will reiterate tirelessly: "Sooner or later we'll reach the ocean."

A small, round lagoon has been left behind by the spring flood, it is isolated from the stream and a young pike is held prisoner there.

Suddenly you come to a place where the stream is so quiet that you can hear a bullfinch grumbling or a finch rustling among last year's leaves.

Or you come to where two powerful rivulets merge at an acute angle and with all their might smash into the bank, reinforced by the numerous roots of an ancient fir.

It is so beautiful that I sit down on these roots to rest and listen to the two rivulets calling to each other down below, repeating their everlasting "sooner or later".

Water has spread to a stand of very young aspens, forming quite a pool, and collecting in one corner it started falling down from the metre-high drop. The drumming was heard far and wide, but in the pool itself there were only small, gentle ripples, and the young aspens overturned in reflection, kept trying and failing to wiggle away like water snakes.

I have become so attached to this stream that I can't walk away from it, I begin to miss it at once.

I came out on to some forest road or other, the grass between the two ruts, filled with water, is at its lowest here and so green, almost poison green.

The leaf-buds are gloriously green and fragrant on the youngest birches, but the forest as a whole is still bare, yet a cuckoo has already come: it's supposed to bode ill if a cuckoo comes to a bare forest.

It is already the twelfth year that I've been coming here, to this clearing, in early spring when the forest is still bare and nothing has flowered yet save the mezereon, the anemones and the primulas. I know all the bushes, trees and even tree stumps here so well that this clearing has come to be my garden, as it were: I've lovingly touched every bush, every birch and fir, and they have become mine, as if I'd

planted them with my own hands to make my own garden.

I returned from my "garden" to the stream in time to see a great forest event: a huge, old fir, undermined by the water, collapsed with all its old and new cones and its numerous branches, to lie across the stream, and now a small rivulet went bumping into every branch and, as it got through, it called back to the others: "sooner or later..."

The stream ran out of the dark forest into a sunlit meadow and spread out into a wide pool. The first yellow flower poked its head out of the water, and frogs' roe lay like a honeycomb and it was so ripe that the black tadpoles showed through the transparent cells. A great number of blue flies, the size of fleas, were flying about low over the water, falling in, reappearing again from somewhere and falling again, which apparently made up the whole of their brief life. A water bug, shining like copper, whirled like a top and a water-strider skidded this way and that, without stirring the water at all. A large, bright butterfly flew over the still pool. The little puddles round the pool have become overgrown with grass and flowers, and on the early pussy-willows the plump catkins have blossomed and now looked like little chicks in yellow fluff.

Now, what has happened to the stream? Half of the water went one way, and half went the other. Perhaps, in its struggle to reach the

ocean "sooner or later" the water had split in two: one half said that its way was the quickest, and the other half saw a short cut, and so they separated and made a large circle and joyously met, to go on together again. Obviously, there were no different ways for water to take, all ways would bring it to the ocean sooner or later.

It was all such a feast for the eyes, the stream's "sooner or later" made such lovely hearing, the fragrance of the pitchy leaf-buds of the poplars and the birches was so delicious, that I felt completely content and had no more desire to go anywhere. I lowered myself between the tree roots, hugged the trunk, lifted my face to the warm sun, and then the moment I had longed for came and stopped, and I, a merest man of the earth, was the first to enter the blossoming world.

My stream had reached the ocean.

STREAMS OF FLOWERS

Where streams of spring water had come rushing along earlier, there were now streams of flowers.

It was so nice to walk over that meadow. "So those streams of turbid water had a purpose," I thought.

LIVE NIGHTS

Three or four days ago, the advance of spring took a huge and last step. Our forest became a hothouse from the warmth and the rains, the air was filled with the fragrance of the new, stickly leaves of the poplars, birches, and flowering willows. The time of really warm, *live* nights began. It was good to look back from the heights of this splendour, and rule that if miserable, rainy days were necessary for the creation of such wonderful live nights, they should occur every spring.

LIFE-GIVING RAIN

At dawn, the sun looked out for a minute and wrapped itself in a soft cloud; and then a gentle, warm rain fell, as life-giving for plants as love is for us, humans.

This warm rain, falling on the buds of the reviving trees, touches the bark, which instantly changes colour, so tenderly that you cannot help feeling that this heavenly water is for plants what love is for us. This love-water washed and caressed the roots of that tall tree until it collapsed from love and made a bridge from one bank to the other, while the heavenly love-rain continues to fall on the tree with its bared roots, and the same love that made it collapse is now making it open its leaf-buds and exhale its pitchy fragrance, and this spring

it will bloom like all the others, and give life to new trees.

WATER AND LOVE

For plants water is as essential an element as love is for animals—from the smallest bug to man. Plants thirst for it, and it comes to them—heavenly or earthly water, just as heavenly or earthly love come to us...

A BIRD-CHERRY TREE

I sat down to rest on a fallen birch, feeling sorry for it, and looked at a tall bird-cherry tree, my mind wandering away from it at moments and then returning to it in some bewilderment: before my very eyes it was putting on its transparent garb, woven from a green leafy murmur. Amid the grey, as yet bare trees and dense shrubs it seemed fully garbed, and yet through its greenness I could see a cluster of white birches behind it. However, when I rose to go and gave the bird-cherry tree a farewell look, I could not see any birches behind it. How strange! Could I have dreamed up those birches, or could the bird-cherry tree have put out so many more leaves while my mind wandered away from it that those birches were completely screened from view?

A GOOD HOUSEWIFE

What an excellent housewife and mother was this Anna Danilovna: she had four young children, what's more she worked as a cleaning woman at the ticket office of the railway station, and yet she always managed to keep her two rooms spick and span. When I thought of village life in the old days, the filth, the unkempt children, the drunks loafing while the womenfolk slaved, the difference was like heaven and earth. But when I told Anna Danilovna about it, she grew very sad and told me that she was terribly homesick for her village and would gladly give up this good life and go back.

"And you, Vassily Zakharovich," I asked her husband, "do you also want to go back to your home village?"

"No, I don't want to go anywhere," he replied.

I learnt that he came from a village in Samara Gubernia. His entire family died there during the famine of 1920, he was the only one to survive. An old man in the village took the lad on as a labour hand. Finally, Vassily left him, not a kopeck the richer for his labours, married Anna Danilovna and found a job at a shipyard.

"But aren't you ever homesick?" I persisted.

He smiled, exchanged a twinkling glance with his wife, and said shyly: "She's my home."

BELATED SPRING

The lilies-of-the-valley flower first, and then the sweetbrier. Everything has its own blossom-time. But sometimes, a whole month after the lilies-of-the-valley are over, a single flower continues to bloom in the blackest forest thickets somewhere. The same happens with people, though very rarely. A man may be living in the lea of life, in quiet and shadow, and people think his time is almost up, and walk past him. And suddenly he comes out into the open, unexpectedly blossoming and glowing with life.

THE DAISY

How delightful! In a clearing in the forest I saw a daisy, the most ordinary "he loves me, he loves me not" kind. This happy find made me think again that the forest reveals itself fully only to people who have a feeling of kinship with its creatures. Now this first daisy, seeing someone coming towards it, probably asks: "He loves me, he loves me not?" And then: "He hasn't noticed me, he is walking past without seeing me, he does not love me, he loves only himself. Oh, he *has* noticed me! He does love me! But if he does, everything is wonderful: if he loves me, I won't mind even if he picks me."

LOVE

There was not a trace of what people call

love in the life of this old artist. All his love, everything that people live by in their private world, had been dedicated to art. Wrapped up in his visions and the veil of poetry, he remained a child at heart, content with his outbursts of mortal anguish and inebriation with the glory of living nature. It is quite likely that he would have died, convinced that that's all there was to life on earth...

But then, one day, a woman came to him, and it was to her and not to a dream of his that he murmured "I love you."

That is how it was always said, but Phacelia, expecting a different and extraordinary expression of feeling from the artist, asked him:

"And what does it mean—I love you?"

"It means that if I've one last piece of bread left I won't eat it, I'll give it to you; if you fall ill, I won't leave your side, and if I must work for you I'll get into the harness and pull for two..."

And he told her many more things which men are prepared to suffer for love.

In vain did Phacelia expect something extraordinary from him.

"Giving up your last piece of bread, nursing the sick, and working like a horse, that's the usual thing, everybody does that," said Phacelia.

"And that's exactly what I want," replied the artist. "I want to be like everybody else. What I am trying to say is that at long last I've come to know the great happiness of being like all good people, and not someone solitary, and apart."

HUNTING STORIES

ROMKA

The First Pointing

My pointer pup has been named Romulus, but I mostly call him Roma, Romka, and occasionally title him Roman Vassilievich.

This pup's ears and legs are growing much faster than the rest of him. His ears have grown so long that when he bends down they cover his eyes, and his legs are always getting caught in something and making him fall over himself.

This is what happened today, for instance: as he was walking up the stone basement steps, he dislodged a loose brick with his huge paw, and it went bouncing down the steps. Dismayed, Romka stood at the head of the stairs, his ears hanging over his eyes. He looked down the stairs for a long time, turning his head this way and that, so his ear would swing back and let him see properly.

"What d'you think of that, Roman Vassilievich," I said to him. "It skips as though it were alive, eh?"

Romka looked at me intelligently.

"Don't stand there gawking at me," I told him. "It might be getting ready to jump up the stairs and hit you straight on the nose."

Romka shifted his eyes to the brick. He was probably dying to run down the stairs and find out why that dead brick had suddenly come to life and skipped. But that would be too dangerous: what if the brick grabbed him there and pulled him down into the dark basement and kept him there forever?

"What shall we do then?" I asked him. "Bolt?"

Romka looked at me for just one moment, but I understood perfectly what he wanted to tell me:

"I'm thinking of bolting myself, but supposing when I turn round he grabs me by the tail?"

Bolting seemed impossible, and so Romka stood perfectly still, pointing—for the first time in his life—at the dead brick the way big dogs do when they smell a live bird in the grass.

The longer he stood thus, the more dangerous and frightening it became: according to the canine way of thinking, the deader the enemy tries to appear, the more terrible he will be when he suddenly comes alive and springs.

"I'll outstand him," Romka was telling himself.

And he fancied that the brick was whispering back:

"I'll out-lie him."

A brick, of course, can remain lying down for a hundred years if it has to, but standing still is hard on a pup, he was already tired and trembling all over.

"What shall we do then?" I asked him.

"Maybe bark once?" he replied in his own way.

"Go ahead, bark all you want," I told him.

Romka gave one bark, and jumped back. In his fright he must have imagined that the brick had stirred slightly, aroused by his bark. He stood at a safe distance, watching it. No, the brick was not creeping out. He stole up closer, and peeped down: it was there as before.

"Maybe I should bark once more?" he wondered.

He barked, and sprang back.

Hearing his bark, Kate—Romka's mother—came running. With her eyes fixed on whatever her son had been barking at, she started down the steps very, very slowly. Romka, naturally enough, stopped barking, leaving it to his mother, and stared down the stairs far more bravely than before.

By the smell of Romka's paw Kate recognised the frightening brick and sniffed it: it was perfectly dead and harmless. And then, just to be on the safe side, she sniffed all round it, and finding nothing suspicious, lifted her head and told her son with her eyes:

"I think everything's alright here, Roma."

Reassured, Romka started wagging his tail.

As Kate came up the stairs, Romka went to her and tugged at her ear.

Early Morning

The sun had not risen yet, and mist still lay in the hollows. My quick Romka was running about, tracing designs on the dew-grey grass of the meadow.

We walked across to a small rye field framed in marshy shrubbery, which was all but submerged in flowering grasses. The rye was turning brown. This year, thanks to the frequent rains, the flowers in the meadows were unusually bright and gorgeous. I do not want to name them, because their names are so commonplace and say so little about each flower individually.

When we came to the edge of the rye field again, the blue cornflowers, showing against the aquamarine of the rye stems, were a dearer sight than the stars at night.

Romka the Vacuum Cleaner

People were carting clover from the meadow, and it seemed impolite to do any shooting. Romka had had nothing to do for two whole days and was bored silly. He was playing a game he had invented, using his nose as a vacuum cleaner. This is what he did: he'd press one nostril to a crack between the floorboards, squash the rest of his nose down hard, and pull in the dust from below. When he had sniffed enough

in one place, he'd move to another, leaving behind him a damp impression of his snout.

I grew tired of listening to this vacuum cleaner at work, and towards evening I thought I'd better take him out to the marshes.

A Monster Among the Daisies

I came out to a dry valley and let Romka loose. Suddenly a cat jumped out of a bush, and before I could shout, let alone pull out my whistle, Romka rushed in pursuit.

I found them in a glade: the cat sat humped up, tensed for a mortal spring and wearing the most frightening expression in the world: it's how even the weakest of men, sensing imminent death, look in their utter despair: "I'm not afraid because my death will also be your death! "

Romka stood motionless amid the daisies, facing this monster, and his eyes were bloodshot. I whistled. I called. Slowly he shifted his glance to me. I shook my whip in the air. He came to me, slowly skirting the bush. I did not see where the cat vanished.

Romka is such a handsome big dog, that even horses shy from him.

A BUSH SCHOOL

A young pointer must be taught not to run about the field farther than fifty steps away from

his master, and even less than that in the forest and, more important still, the dog should never forget its master and not get carried away with its own doings. All this taken together—ranging the field in correct circles and not losing sight of its master—is what you teach a young hunting dog first of all.

I took Romka along to the hill, densely covered with shrubs, on which plots are allotted to the local inhabitants for fuel. Everyone chops down as much as he needs, of course. Some don't do any felling at all, and their plots stand out like wooded islands. Some fell the larger shrubs and leave the small ones to grow. Or again, some will chop down all there is and leave only a pile of rotting brushwood on their plot. What this hill looks like as a result is a head whose hair has been cut by a blind barber.

One could hardly expect to find any game there, so near town, and that was all to the good when one first starts training a young dog. With nothing to distract it, the dog learns one thing: ranging correctly, never forgetting its master for a moment.

I let Romka off the leash and patted him. He did not feel me releasing him, and stood beside me, riveted to the spot.

"Search! " I told him and motioned ahead with my hand.

He understood and dashed away. In a flash he vanished in the bushes, but losing sight of me frightened him and he came back. For several seconds he stood and stared at me strange-

ly, as if he were trying to imprint my figure on his memory to take away with him and constantly see it before him among the bushes and stumps shaped not like humans. Having finished his mysterious job, he showed me his perpetually wagging tail and ran off.

It was not the same here as in open country where you can always see your dog. In shrubbery or forest the dog must be taught, when it has disappeared to the left of you, to make an invisible circle and reappear to the right of you. If it has not returned to the right of me I will know that it has scented game somewhere near and is pointing. It is especially easy to watch your dog when you are walking along a forest cutting and the dog keeps crossing it ahead of you all the time.

And here my Romka vanished in the bushes and did not come back. I was very glad that his first sense of freedom proved stronger than his attachment to his master. I didn't mind: I was a hunter and I understood how he felt. I should only teach him to use his freedom in co-ordination with me, and then it would be easier on both of us. I ran through the shrubbery to another clearing, loping across so as not to leave too many footprints from which he'd easily find me. In the middle of the clearing stood a huge juniper bush: I took a running jump right into the bush, and lay low there.

I could not hear Romka running on the wet ground, but I did hear the snapping of branches

and his loud panting breath. I well understood what that panting meant: he had lost me, was dashing about madly looking for me, and was so alarmed that he got out of breath at once. However, he had figured out correctly enough where I might be, for I saw him dash across the clearing where he had left me.

When all grew quiet, I blew my whistle shrilly. It was very much like a game of blind man's buff.

My whistle must have reached him when he was standing in dismay somewhere, and listening. He determined correctly where the sound came from and rushed headlong to me, panting like a steam engine, and stopped short on the clearing with my juniper bush in the middle of it.

I held my breath.

From his fast sprint and his terrible agitation his tongue was lolling out of the side of his mouth. He could not, of course, scent anything in the state he was in, and could depend only on his hearing. He pricked up his ears, but they would not stand up and drooped, blocking his hearing. He tried bending his head first this way and then that, but still it was no good. At last, he guessed what the matter was: he could not hear his master for his own loud open-mouthed breathing. He shut his mouth, sucking in half of his lip in his haste, and stood there, listening.

I had to clamp my hand over my own mouth, so as not to burst into laughter at the sight of

that funny face with the pinched lip. Without his master, this open country seemed a wilderness to him, where only wolves, his ancestors, prowled at will. They would not forgive him his treachery, his loving a human being for giving him a warm home and food. The wolves would tear him to pieces and eat the pieces up. You had to howl with the wolves if you had to live with them. And Romka tried. He raised his head high and howled.

I had never heard him make that sound before. He must have felt that it really was a wilderness of prowling wolves, with his master gone. Wolf cubs howl exactly like that when their mother has gone for food and is a long time returning.

Anything might happen, of course. Say, the mother-wolf has killed a sheep and is carrying it home for her children. A hunter has followed her, he shoots the mother-wolf, goes to the den, takes the cubs home and feeds them. In nature's creatures the reserves of tenderness are ungaugeable; the wolf cubs transpose the love they had for their mother to this man, they lick his hands, and climb all over him. These young cubs do not know that it was he who killed their mother. But wild wolves know everything, they are the mortal enemies of man and dog, that tribe of traitors.

Romka howled so piteously that it wrung my heart. But I was his teacher, I could not show pity for him.

I stopped breathing.

He turned his rump to me, alerted for sounds from another direction. Perhaps a snipe had whistled as it flew past overhead?

And Romka was wondering if his master had got up into the sky and was calling him.

And this tee-wit came from a lapwing, soaring up in fright from a cow wading into a pool.

It could very well be his master whistling for him, Romka thought, it wasn't too high up and not too far away. And off he dashed to the sound, and then I blew hard on my whistle.

"I'm here, Romka! "

He came back.

In a mere fifteen minutes I had worried the life out of him, given him fright of the forest without a human presence to last him his lifetime, and planted in him a terror of his ancestors, the wild wolves. And when at last I stirred intentionally in my bush and he heard me, and when I lit my pipe and he caught the smell of tobacco and recognised it, his ears drooped, and his head became round like a watermelon. I straightened up. He lay down contritely. I climbed out of the bush, patted him, and he started leaping about with squeals of ecstatic joy.

YARIK

There was a time when I did not have a hunting dog and went hunting by myself on dewy mornings, finding the prints of birds on the

grass, following them like a dog and using my scent too, I think, though I cannot swear to this.

Just then, a vet who lived some thirty versts away had most fortunately mated his marvellous Irish setter bitch with a dog of the same breed, both of them born on a nobleman's country estate. And one fine day, just when I was finding life especially hard, this friend of mine brought me a six-week-old pup, an Irish setter. I accepted the gift gratefully, and I brought up the pup to be my good companion and true friend. Training a dog without a gun can be as enjoyable as real hunting. I remember how it was once... On a clearing round old, black tree stumps there were masses of tall red flowers and because of them the whole clearing looked red, although flowers of other colours were much more numerous here: half-yellow and half-blue cow wheat, white daisies with a yellow button in the centre, bluebells, lilac lady-smock, and yet the overall effect was red. Close to the black stumps there still were some over-ripe and very sweet strawberries. In summer, a light rain does not worry me in the least, I sat it out under a fir, where swarms of mosquitoes also gathered to keep out of the rain, and though I tried to smoke them out, drawing on my pipe with all my might, they refused to go and tormented my dog Yarik terribly. So I had to light a small fire with fir cones, and the smoke poured so thick that very soon we got rid of the mosquitoes, driving them out into the rain. And we had barely finished with the

mosquitoes when the rain stopped. Even so we had to stay under the fir for another half-hour until the birds came out to feed again and leave fresh prints on the dew. When I thought the time was up, we came out on to the red clearing and I let Yarik go, telling him: "Search, pal."

Yarik was now in his third year. Under my guidance he was taking the highest course of training for an Irish setter; if all went well by the end of the summer I'd have the finest hunting dog in the world, an Irish setter, trained by me, a tireless dog who could scent game an enormous distance away.

I often looked at my Yarik's nose with envy and thought: "If I had a nose like that I'd run along the red clearing against the wind, catching the various exciting smells."

But we are not sensitive to smells, and are thus denied a great enjoyment. People are always asking: "How is your eyesight? Is your hearing good?" But none of us will ever ask: "How is your sense of smell, is your nose good?" For years now I have been training hunting dogs. And every time a dog scents game and leads me to it, I feel happily excited and often wonder: "What would it feel like if it wasn't Yarik but I myself who had scented the game?"

"Go, search," I told my friend.

And off he went running in circles round the red clearing.

Before long he stopped on the edge of the clearing under some trees, sniffed the place over thoroughly, looked at me very seriously out of

the corner of his eye, and invited me to follow: we could not understand each other at a glance. He led me along very slowly, all but crawling, and with his legs bent and shortened he looked like a fox.

We came to a growth so dense that only Yarik could crawl in, but I could not risk letting him go there all by himself; without me there to restrain him he could get so excited over the birds that he'd pounce on them, wet with rain, and bring to nought all my training. I wanted to call him back when suddenly he gave me a look, wagging his magnificent wing-like tail, as though to tell me:

"They spent the night here and fed on the clearing with the red flowers."

"So what shall we do?" I asked him.

He sniffed the flowers: there was no scent of birds. Obviously, the rain had washed away all their traces, and the ones we had followed still remained because they were under the trees.

The only thing to do was for Yarik to make another circle round the clearing until he came upon some fresh tracks made since the rain. He made less than half a circle when he stopped beside a small but very thick bush. The smell of black grouse hit him in the face when he was in full gallop, and so he came to a standstill in a very curious pose, his body twisted into a ring, so that if he had wanted to he could have feasted his eyes on his magnificent tail. I went quickly to him, stroked him and whispered:

"Go, if you can."

He straightened himself out, made a tentative step forward and found that it could be done if he stepped very softly. He walked in this manner round the bush, and then indicated to me that the birds had been there during the rain.And following these very fresh green tracks visible on the bedewed grey grass, he led me all but touching the ground with his feathery tail. They had probably heard us and also moved ahead, which information was given me by Yarik in his own way:

"They're moving ahead of us and very close."

The black-grouse family went into a large juniper bush, and here Yarik came to a *dead* point. Until then he could open his mouth from time to time and pant noisily, with his long pink tongue lolling, but now his jaws were clenched tight and only the very tip of his tongue showed like a small pink leaf. A mosquito alighted on this pink piece of flesh and started sucking, and I could see how the dark-brown leathery tip of Yarik's nose twitched from the pain and danced from the smell, but he could not possibly pull his tongue in: if he opened his mouth he might let out a loud breath and frighten off the birds.

But I was not as nervous as Yarik, and so I went up to him cautiously, flicked the mosquito off his tongue, and stopped to admire him: he stood as if cast in bronze with his wing-like tail stretched out in line with his body, and his eyes burning with the concentrated fire of life.

Quietly I walked round the bush and stopped

opposite Yarik so the birds would soar up and not fly away unnoticed behind the bush.

We remained thus for quite some time, and the birds in the bush knew very well, of course, that we were standing on either side. I made a step to the bush and heard the mother-grouse clucking to her young:

"I'll go and take a look, and you wait here."

And out she flew with a great crackling noise.

If she had come at me Yarik would not have stirred, and even if she had simply flown over him he would still have remembered that the chief quarry was in the bush and that it was a terrible crime to run after a flushed bird. But this large grey mother-grouse, almost the size of a hen, suddenly somersaulted in the air, coming up to Yarik's very nose, and started away very slowly and low to the ground, luring Yarik on with a cry:

"Come on, catch me, I can't fly! "

Ten steps away she dropped dead on the grass, picked herself up and ran, stirring the tall red flowers.

This was too much for Yarik. Forgetting my years of training, he dashed in pursuit.

The ruse worked, the mother-grouse had lured the beast away from her brood, and now she cried to her young:

"Fly away, all of you fly in different directions! " And suddenly soared over the forest and that was the last we saw of her.

The fledglings flew off in different directions, and Yarik seemed to hear from afar:

"Silly fool! Silly fool! "

"Come back," I shouted to my duped friend.

Slowly, he came to me with a guilty look.

"What have you done?" I asked him in a special, tearful voice.

He lay down.

"Come on, come on! "

He crawled to me, put his head on my knee and begged me very, very earnestly to forgive him.

"All right," I told him, climbing into the bush. "Come here with me, and sit quietly, don't pant: you and I are now going to make fools of those characters."

Some ten minutes later I gave a very soft whistle like the fledglings' which meant:

"Mummy, where are you?"

"Cluck, cluck," she replied, telling them that she was coming.

And then a whistling just like mine came from here, there and everywhere:

"Mummy, where are you?"

"Coming, coming," she answered all of them.

One of the chicks was whistling very near me, I answered him, he came running, and I could see the grass moving right beside my knee.

I looked Yarik straight in the eyes, shook a fist at him, quickly cupped the bit of moving grass with my hand, and pulled out a grey chick, the size of a pigeon.

"Here, sniff him," I whispered to Yarik.

He turned his nose away for fear of panting out loud.

"Come on, pal, sniff him," I begged in a tearful voice.

Yarik sniffed the chick, breathing like a steam engine.

There could be no sterner punishment.

Now I could whistle all I wanted, knowing that the mother-grouse would come running to me; she'd collect her chicks together, see that one was missing and would come back for him.

There were seven of them, not counting mine. I could hear them falling silent one after the other as they found their mother, and when all seven fell silent, I—the eighth chick—whistled: "Mummy, where are you?"

"Come here," she replied.

"No, bring everyone here to me."

I could see her running, her neck sticking out from the grass now here, now there like the neck of a bottle, and behind her the grass rippling as her brood followed her.

They were sitting not two steps away from me, and now I signalled to Yarik with my eyes:

"Don't do anything foolish now! "

And I released my chick.

He flapped his wings against the bush, the whole family started flapping their wings, and all took flight together.

Yarik and I watched them from the bush, and laughed at them:

"We fooled you this time, didn't we! "

VERNY

My Yarik was well trained for the marshes but being a passionate lover of forest hunting I was unable to resist the temptation and when the time came I went grouse hunting with him in the forest. That was my mistake: I ought to have waited. However, in those first days Yarik worked splendidly in the forest, as well as he did in the marshes, I only had to whistle for him more often, that was all. One evening, however, when we were on our way home, a grouse-hen ran out into the road and started teasing Yarik with her usual tricks. He dashed after her, came upon her brood, lost his head and went chasing after them. In the heat of the moment I gave him such a thrashing that he suddenly sprang away and ran, I ran after him, but he got away and stayed away for the whole night, and in the morning I saw his ginger ears in our potato patch.

Anyone who has ever trained dogs will easily understand my utter despair: Yarik could be reformed only by dint of enormous effort, and as for taking him hunting that year, it was quite out of the question. The only solution was for me to find myself another dog to hunt with and in the meantime train Yarik all over again, so that gradually his misbehaviour would become erased from his memory.

I started looking about for a dog, just any dog, even if it was no better than my late Flute, so long as it was of some help in hunting.

I asked everybody, sent my children out to make enquiries, and myself verified the rumours that came in. One day, the children brought me this news: as they passed a homestead with a large bee-garden, they sat down to rest and saw an old man come out of the house and start chopping wood. When he had chopped up quite a heap, he whistled and a dog came running—a shaggy black dog with ginger spots and clearly a thorough bred. This dog picked up a log with his teeth, carried it into the house, came back for the next one, and one by one took the whole lot home while his old master sat and rested. Now he locked the door of his house, opened the door of the shed, and started chopping more wood while the dog carried these logs into the shed. The children had not stayed to see more and had hurried home, but from the quantity the old chap had in store it could be assumed that he had been chopping up the logs day in day out, either for his own use in winter or else for sale, and that the dog was helping him.

"Are you quite sure that it's a black dog with ginger spots and very thick fur?" I asked.

"Of course we're sure," the children replied. "His forehead is even rounder than our Yarik's, there's a sort of dip in the bridge of his nose and he's so shaggy that he looks like an apeman."

The next day I went to the farmstead to seek my fortune.

The scene I came upon was exactly as described by the children: the old man was

chopping wood and his beautiful Gordon setter was carrying the logs into the shed. On one of his countless trips the dog must have felt tired, so he dropped the log before reaching the shed and returned. The old man picked up a switch. The Gordon setter, seeing the switch, ran to the old man and lay down on his side at his feet. The old man hit him hard twice and flung the switch away. The dog jumped up, picked it up, went gaily leaping round his master with the switch between his teeth, then dashed to the log he had dropped, carried it to the shed, and continued with his work.

His head was a rare sight, in magnificence it was only comparable to the wigs worn in the reign of Louis XIV. The only thing wrong with him was that his hind parts seemed rather wooden, as a consequence of beatings or perhaps distemper. Later I heard people tell what the poor dog had suffered in beatings from the wood-chopping old man he worked for, and so very possibly that was the answer.

"He's a gun dog, you shouldn't make him do this kind of work," I said to the old man.

"Gun dog indeed," he grumbled. "There's even no teaching him to stack the wood, he'll throw it down just anyhow, but stacking—no."

The old man's son heard us talking and came out of the house. A samovar was kindled, and we sat down to tea. I told them about my trouble with Yarik and that I would like to buy their dog, Verny, if his game-scent was any good at all. They told me that they bought the dog

from Bendryshev out of pity for him during the hungry years. I knew Bendryshev well, he was the best shot, dog trainer and keenest hunter in our parts. It occurred to me hopefully that perhaps these peasants simply did not know how to treat a hunting dog and were abusing him from ignorance, and that I ought to buy him there and then before the simpletons realised that he was worth money. Twenty rubles was the price they named—a mere trifle. But since, when dealing with peasants, you must never let them see that they're selling something cheap, I began to haggle. I drank tea with honey, poured sweat and haggled, although I was prepared to pay them thirty and more. My hosts also drank tea, poured sweat and haggled, and the funny chaps sang praises not to the dog but to Bendryshev, reiterating that he knew hunting like our Father Yegor knew the Lord's Prayer. My haggling got me fifteen pounds of honey, and a whistle on top of that, and grabbing the dog and the honey I made off at the double.

For the next two days I fondled and made much of Verny and did not take him out; he became attached to me so quickly that the moment I left the room he started whining and whimpering. He was the kindest of creatures, overflowing with an orphan's emotions. On the third day, confident now that he would not leave my side, I took him and the children to the forest.

Yarik was good for the marshes. And we

took Verny on a leash to the forest. I released him in a clearing near which there might be grouse broods. At first he dashed into the bushes and then, as though remembering something, came back and stood facing us across the clearing for a long time, cocking his shaggy head this way and that, for all the world as though he were photographing us. Having done what he evidently had to do, he vanished, reappeared, vanished again, and everything went as it should with an excellently trained dog in short-range forest search. Very soon Verny caught a scent where the large cutting is divided from the swamp by dense shrubbery, and very cautiously led us on. He did not have that passion in him which Yarik had, nor those burning eyes which aroused a hunting dog's instincts in your own self and you completely forgot that you were a Homo sapiens. Verny led us very cautiously, as if he were not doing it to satisfy his own urge, but merely to oblige us. He took too long, the birds were obviously getting away, and when finally he understood this, he stopped, looked about him, made an unhurried circle and in this way cut off the birds' retreat from a bush that stood all by itself. Very calmly and matter-of-factly he pointed, pinning them down. We placed ourselves in line, with myself in the middle and the boys on either side of me, and stood thus until I finally took the risk and told Verny: "Go! " He took one step, then one more, and a bird flew out—I fired, another one flew out—I fired again. All three of us stood shooting the

birds as they flew out of their stronghold, and they fell into the swamp, overgrown with rushes as tall or even taller than an average man. When we had stopped firing, during which Verny had stood still, he asked me permission with his eyes and went into the swamp to retrieve the birds one after another.

Game was plentiful here. In a few days we bagged enough to pay the price of a new dog, and in my happiness I inadvertently dropped a brick: I wrote to Verny's former owners that I was very pleased with him, that I did not know how to thank them, and that I fully agreed that Bendryshev really knew hunting like Father Yegor knew the Lord's Prayer. Afterwards I heard that my letter had grieved them sorely: they had thought that the dog was no use and that Bendryshev had swindled them.

Within the very first days of Verny's instalment in my house, Yarik's character underwent a great change. He was too proud to show that he resented Verny's presence. Even when I took my gun and Verny started jumping for joy around me, Yarik remained lying stonily unconcerned, as if he wasn't dying to go hunting himself. But actually he was suffering tortures, and if I called him he came running and shoved Verny aside. He used to be very untidy: when I gave him a bone he would pick it clean of all that was tasty and not bother with the harder, less succulent part. Nowadays, for fear that Verny would get what remained, he lay beside his bone and snarled if Verny came near. If I

called him, he came with the bone in his teeth, if he had to answer the call of nature he still did everything with the bone clutched tight in his teeth. I watched with alarm how Yarik tried to pick a quarrel with Verny, I feared this very much because I knew from experience that kind, lonely dogs like Verny could stand a lot, but if provoked too far they fought to the bitter end.

One washing day, a tub with blueing water had been left in the yard after the wash had been hung up to dry, and Yarik lay very close to it, gnawing a bone. When he came down to the hard part which he could not bite through, he gave up and pushed the bone under the tub so Verny shouldn't see it. At that very moment I called Verny to come hunting. This, naturally, stabbed Yarik painfully, but he pretended he didn't care and hated Verny all the more bitterly. Of course, when you were called hunting you could not bother about a silly bone, that was self-evident to someone as clever as Yarik. But Verny happened to run past the very place where the bone was hidden, and this gave Yarik an excellent pretext to attack him, presumably over the bone and not because he was jealous or anything. He did it so powerfully and adroitly that Verny, his movements impeded by his wooden rump, flopped on his back in the tub of blueing and lay there with his legs sticking up as stiffly as if he were a wooden toy horse. I understood what Verny was feeling: for a dog who had suffered the indignity of carrying

firewood like a slave and the cruelty of his old master's beatings, there wasn't anything so very disgraceful about lying legs-up in the tub for a minute or looking wet when he emerged: falling in had not hurt him either. But he had not done anything wrong, he had not been going after that ginger snob's bone, so why attack him? It was about time he put an end to his nastiness once and for all. And so, he jumped out of the tub and went for Yarik. Verny was immeasurably the stronger.

As a rule, if strengths are so uneven, the weaker of the dogs, when so ferociously attacked, lies down with his legs up in the air, and then the stronger one pounces on him, but does not bite and only snarls, and after holding the vanquished foe at his mercy for some time lets him go, and at the nearest tree or post leaves a note, most probably laying down the terms for their future co-existence. The loser then sniffs at this note and leaves his own, simply endorsing it perhaps. I very rarely saw the loser make any amendments in his note, but when this did happen, the conqueror left a new note, and the weaker dog signed unconditional agreement.

But it was unimaginable that a dog as proud as Yarik would surrender without a struggle, and so naturally he rushed into the fray and at first acquitted himself very well.

Frantic with fear for Yarik, I ran to the tub and dashed the blueing water over the two locked in savage combat, but it did no good at all.

Then I gripped Verny by the tail and dragged him away, giving Yarik a kick in the chest, but this only made him go all the angrier for the bigger dog. I gripped Yarik's tail and pulled him away, but this made matters even worse. Now Verny sank his teeth into Yarik and if it were a bit nearer the throat that would have been the end of him. And in that fateful moment my boys came running and pulled the dogs apart.

It was not in Verny's nature to nurse a grudge, but now Yarik was openly hostile and life in our yard became unbearable. I had to keep the dogs apart, but I could not watch them all the time, and my heart was troubled.

Once in September, when one could be perfectly certain that no grouse broods could be found in the forest, I tried to hunt with Yarik, and it was a great success. He worked excellently. Overjoyed that my manoeuvre to reform a dog by means of cool-headed work had proved a success, or simply because I felt hot and tired, I forgot all about Verny when we got home and left Yarik in the yard with him.

During dinner we suddenly heard a terrible snarling outside and, looking out of the window, saw the two dogs slowly advancing on each other with their hair standing up on end.

If we made the slightest movement or shouted, they'd go into battle at once. So we sat there with bated breath hoping that somehow the storm would blow over. After all, Yarik must feel pleased with his hunting, and Verny was a good soul and wouldn't start first.

With his fur bristling wrathfully, Yarik came right up to Verny who did not snarl and waited in sullen silence to see what was going to happen next. Yarik circled Verny slowly then went to the wall and left his note on it—probably setting down his terms. Very cautiously Verny came after him and while Yarik was putting down his terms sniffed at the root of his tail. Verny now made his amendments to the terms, and Yarik sniffed the root of his tail. Yarik signed his agreement, after which Verny made a half-circle round Yarik and put down his final endorsement which with them probably meant a ratification of their peace pact.

Since then peace has reigned in our yard and their duties are strictly divided. Verny works more in the forest and in tricky places with a little bell when hunting grouse, ptarmigans, and plump woodcocks in the autumn. Yarik is good in the marshes hunting snipe, and partridges in open country, but when I take him to the forest I have confidence in him only when he is in sight, running about the thin shrubbery or clearings.

KATE

Kate comes from prize-winning pointer parents, well known to all dog experts. Kate has a two-coloured coat: two large brown spots on the back, and coffee beans scattered on white all over the rest of her.

It is I who changed her name to Kate from Kitty, which her former owners called her. They were a newly married couple. They had no children the first two years, and they treated Kitty as if she was their baby. She spent her life lying on the sofa in their Moscow flat. A little longer, and a hunting dog of the finest breed would have become a useless, spoilt lapdog. Towards the end of the second year, however, the wife, soon to become a mother, found it difficult to go up and down the stairs to take the dog out—they lived on the fifth floor—and the husband was away at work all day. At this time I had the misfortune with Verny: he was bitten by a rabid dog and had to be put down, which even now is too painful for me to describe. When I heard about Kitty I decided to try and make something of this dog, since I still felt dissatisfied with my too-hot Yarik, and persuaded the owners to let me have her. They sold their Kitty to me for a reasonable sum, wept a little and begged me never to whip her.

I had heard from experienced trainers that a two-year old dog was still good for training but only if it had not been ruined by inept teachers. Kate was so innocent that she did not even chase birds, and at first all she hunted was flowers: she loved to snap off a daisy as she ran and toss it high up in the air. Among the merits of her breed are exceptional politeness and mental grasp, and it was a good thing that she was a bitch—bitches are always smarter. I put her through everything that is called indoor training in practically one

single day. I put a piece of white bread on the floor, and when Kate made to snap it up I yelled "No! " and gave her a flick on the nose.

"Remember, you're not lying on your sofa in Moscow now! " I told her.

In fifteen minutes I taught her not to snap up anything without my permission, even if the piece of bread was lying on her nose.

Next, I taught her to obey such words as "go", "come back", "search", "here", "quiet", simply by raising my voice. The following day I took her to a thick hazelnut grove where there was no game of any kind: I'd hide in the bushes and let her find me, and thus in one day I taught her how to make a short-range forest search. Out in the open, it took longer, of course. I walked in a zigzag course, like a sail ship tacking against the wind, fluttering my hands slightly or whistling to tell Kate to follow me. I did this for two or three days, and finally we had covered all the essentials and I could start training her with live game.

I took Kate to the marsh at a time when the snipe had not yet poured out into the open from the thickets and there were only young lapwings about. It is stated quite erroneously in hunters' guidebooks that lapwings are no use for dog training: I know none better. It is true that old lapwings excite hot-headed dogs a little too much, but they can easily be scattered with shots; now a young bird lies so still and flat on the ground that you might tread on it if you're not careful.

At first Kate was insensitive to these flat cakes, and I had to show her myself. I nudged one of them with my boot, the cake turned into a lapwing who, as yet unable to fly, toddled away between the hummocks. I made Kate lie down only permitting her to follow the lapwing with her eyes until it lay flat again between the hummocks.

"Quietly go! "

Crouching, Kate went after it. She did not come to a point and only sniffed at the lapwing, which moved on again. I turned Kate's head away so she would not see where the bird now came to rest, but I made a note of it myself, and then let the dog go and search for it tacking against the wind.

She did not catch the scent in the air, but she followed her ground-scent and made a bee-line for the bird. Again she did not come to a point but only nudged the brown cake with her nose. I repeated the exercise a hundred times and got nowhere: the dog could not catch the scent in the air and would not point. I returned home deep in thought. It was quite possible that the dog had lost her natural instinct in those two years of a lapdog's existence in Moscow. Still, in these new conditions it might come back to her.

Lyakhovo Swamp, where I made those experiments with the lapwings, was about eight versts from my home. I could not go there often and see if snipe had come out into the open. Luckily I discovered a small swamp in

the rush thickets bordering on the lake quite near my place. Here Kate flushed two old snipes, and I started training her every day. Though it was not far to go, the outing took two hours of my time every morning, and for another thing I had to change all my clothes after wading through the mire. It was disappointing, too, to come back with the same result every day: all Kate did was flush the snipe without any benefit to her progress.

Once I took my gun along and shot one of the snipe. It fell into the thickets. Kate found it there and, just as in the case of the lapwing, she circled around it until she stuck her nose into it. However, Kate did come to know the smell of the bird, and I could count on her accomplishing something better next time.

I think that it is not only the poets who suffer agonies of creation, in dog-training the agonies are no less awful, and you also start up in the middle of the night with some new bright idea which starts you on a new track.

Once, in the middle of the night, I remembered a dispute in the magazine *Hunter* about the life of snipe. Some people said that after mating the male takes no part in the further life of his family, and others argued that, on the contrary, he often remains near the nest. And here I thought of our two snipe; they must be a family and their nest must be somewhere near. Next morning curiosity hurried me on to the swamp. Kate pottered about, one of the snipe started up, and she remained riveted to the

spot. I moved the swamp grass apart and on a hummock found four eggs, astonishingly big in relation to the size of the grown bird.

Now, that was really wonderful! I'd bring Kate here every day and teach her to come to a point; I would lead her up to the nest on the leash, gradually develop her scent, and when the snipe were hatched I'd catch them, hide them and make her find them... How eagerly I went there the next day! And what did happen was beyond all my expectations. It was about two hundred steps to the nest from the edge of the swamp; Kate emerged from the thickets, made at most fifty steps, came to a point, and then led me on closer and closer to the nest. And the way she stepped with her thin legs was something to see: a ballerina, there's no other word for it! My boots were huge, heavy horrors, made from horse-hide. When Kate stepped it was no louder than a raindrop falling on water. And I lumbered behind her like a mammoth. The noise made her stop, turn round, look at me very sternly and all but say: "Quiet, master, quiet! "

She came to a dead stop when there were five more steps to go. I stroked her, encouraging her to move if only a little nearer, but it seemed impossible. My boots squelched loudly— the she-snipe came flying out.

Kate was aquiver with excitement and seemed to be saying:

"Oh dear, oh dear, what happened?"

But she never budged. I allowed her to come

and sniff the nest very carefully.

I was happy, but when we came out of the thickets, I noticed that haymaking had begun here, and was told that the grass on our private swamp was going to be cut that very evening. I couldn't ask the peasants not to touch the nest, there was certain to be one character among them who would contrarily destroy the nest if I asked him not to. I returned to the swamp, cut some willow twigs, stuck them in the ground round the nest and gave it the appearance of a shrub. The only thing that worried me was that the mother-snipe might take fright at the twigs and abandon her nest. However, the next day Kate led me again along the mowed swamp, again stopped dead about five steps away from the nest, exactly like the day before, and again the mother-snipe came flying out.

As I was training Kate, elsewhere Boris Ivanovich, an artist, was teaching his French pointer, and Mikhail Ivanovich, a doctor, his Irish setter bitch. I invited them to my place for a cup of tea and a chat, and afterwards I took them to the swamp and showed them... In short, I blew my own trumpet as loud as I could, my happiness was so great that it embarrassed me. To the artist I said:

"It was very clever of you to take a pointer to train, you see mine took only three weeks..."

And to the doctor I said:

"It was very clever of you to choose an Irish setter, you'll have to work with him, but then you'll be rewarded with a peerless hunting dog."

Needless to say, they immediately spread the word about my remarkable abilities as a dog trainer, and I became a local celebrity.

Alas, young dog trainers, hunters, newlyweds, and poets, do not ever trust in sudden happiness, it is only an illusion which, in actual fact, blocks your way, and you've got to leap across this barrier, and not sit on it. The happiness I derived from Kate's ideal pointing lasted a week, no more.

Our small swamp turned all the greener a week after it had been mown, and when I came there one lovely greyish day it looked terribly inviting, and I had a feeling that a snipe would come flying out any moment. And fly out it did, just as Kate stepped on the sward. But she took not the slightest notice of the bird. Now a very young fledgling flew out from right under her feet, but Kate ignored it completely and led to the nest like one bewitched. A second fledgling flew out, a third, a fourth, a fifth one, but Kate walked on and on. And as on all the previous occasions she came to a dead stop five steps before the nest, and when I went to look I found nothing but eggshells in the nest. Thinking that the nest must have a stronger smell than the birds themselves, I threw out the eggshells.

But on the following day Kate again led me to the hummock where the nest had been.

I levelled down the hummock, piled dry twigs there in place of the nest and burnt them.

The next day Kate kicked aside the young

snipe and made for the site of the fire.

This meant that all this time, from the very beginning, she had been working only from memory.

This meant that it was simply *a performance.*

This meant that the dog did not sense life itself but only acted as if she did. This dog was not a hunter's friend and helper, she was not a producer of vigorous pups with a good scent, she was an actress.

In such cases many hunters put an end to a dog like that with one bullet. But I decided to try and persuade Kate's former owners to take her back, more or less hinting to them how hunters usually disposed of such dogs.

The day that game shooting was officially permitted I had some fun with my boys, but duck shooting is not my sport. A week later I went after grouse broods—I enjoy it but not wholeheartedly. I like shooting the latest grouse, it's exciting when your dog stops at a huge distance from them and you have to figure out for yourself how to get round them to have them come at you, and when your maneuver works every bird you shoot down is worth ten summer ones.

The ashberries were getting redder and redder. The martlets had long flown away. The swallows were also flocking together. The oats had long been reaped. The lime trees had turned quite yellow, and so had the asps and birches in the marshes. There had already been two light frosts. The potato tops were shrivelled and

black, and the hunters' hearts were breaking because they could not go everywhere at once: to the forest after black grouse, to the marshes after snipe, or to the open fields after partridges.

I tried to miss nothing, and then I was told:

"Yesterday Boris Ivanovich shot down a migrating double snipe."

Grouse and partridges forsaken, I sped to Lyakhovo Swamp eight versts away and lay in wait for the mass migration. And just when the double snipe came pouring out, my horrible boots went and lamed me. One of my feet was blistered so terribly that I could not walk all the way to the swamp. Hiring a horse at this busy farming season was both too expensive and shameful: it's just the way I'm made, I have *to go* hunting, not *drive* there.

I spent a whole day brooding.

And here Kate came up to me, such a woebegone, sorry thing, and so skinny too! I felt sorry for the pretty little dog. There were partridges on the stubble field right behind my backyard but I never shot them, perhaps because it was so near and also because I do not regard them as game birds. But now it occurred to me to try Kate out on them, and, after all, why not shoot a couple for dinner?

I went out in my sandals. The breeze was blowing straight into my face. I made Kate go in tacks, like a sailboat against the wind, and at one of the very first zigzags she caught the scent upwind, sprang aside and stood still.

After a minute she made a jump in another direction, as gracefully as a ballet dancer, and stopped again, staring fixedly at someting all the time. And then she started running in zigzags from me to her invisible goal, slicing the distance finely like cheese. When she had sniffed everything about her and realised that she was already near her goal, she suddenly started leading me as confidently as she had gone to that empty snipe nest.

She stopped dead, like a motor that has been switched off, and trembled all over, barely restraining the impulse to leap right into the thick of the smell.

And suddenly! A huge flock of some thirty partridges came flying out with a great crashing and crackling. I fired twice, and both birds fell not far away.

And Kate *saw* it.

It was only then that everything became clear to me at last. I had trained her in a forest swamp surrounded by shrubs where there was no movement of air. There, she could not understand what it was I wanted her to do and went about poking her nose into the ground. And here, thanks to the strong wind, her natural ability to use her scent, which had been stifled in town, was instantly aroused.

Since it had worked with the partridges, her instinct should also work with snipe and double snipe in the open swamps. I completely forgot that I was wearing sandals and had not even a crust of bread in my pocket. But how could

I give a thought to such trifles! I all but ran the eight versts to Lyakhovo Swamp, just the way I was.

The first test I put Kate to was in a very soggy spot where she sank into the mire to her belly. She caught the upwind smell and led to a round dark hummock, which turned out to be a small straw stack left over from last year. A double snipe and a snipe rose up at once. I fired and got the double snipe. Kate found the snipe and I shot it too. And then we did better and better.

Lyakhovo Swamp stretches for five versts, and the sun was sinking quickly. I got so keyed up that I begged the sun to stand still if only for a little, but deaf to my pleas it sank. It was growing so dark that I could no longer see my sights and fired blindly.

When I at last emerged from the swamp into the stubble field I felt a terrible pain in my feet. My sandals must have been drowned in the mire long ago without my ever noticing it, and the dry stubble had bitten deep into my blisters.

After many marvellous shoots in Lyakhovo Swamp, I once happened to be in that small private swamp of mine where Kate once gave the performance that almost cost her her life. To think what a memory these dogs have! She instantly tensed and led me to where the snipes' nest had been. But the smell of a real live snipe overpowered her passion for acting, and she followed the scent. I was not quick

enough to fire when the bird flew up, I trained my gun after it in the air, wagging the barrel this way and that until I seemed to see a small tube, I fired through that tube, and the snipe fell into the thickets. This time I decided to take the plunge at last and send Kate to retrieve it, and very soon she returned from the thickets carrying the bird in her teeth.

YARIK'S LOVE

Sometimes, going game shooting in the forest, I would swear that I would not say anything to my dog in human language and would address it only with glances, gestures and, in extreme cases, with inarticulate sounds. This is not very easy to do, but then, communicating with animals in this wordless manner, makes you strain your attention and you begin to understand the animal's feelings like your own. That is, I believe, how I understood that Yarik and Kate loved each other, more positively than if they had been speaking and I had been eavesdropping.

Their first meeting did not go well at all. Yarik sniffed her a little, she did not like it, he walked away and lay down in a corner to sulk. That moment marked a change in Yarik's disposition. This handsomest of dogs had enjoyed our undivided love and tenderness since he was six weeks old. I am not humanising animals, I am not idealising them, but I have definite

proof that the connection between a hunting dog of the best breeds and its master is stronger than hunger: however hungry Yarik might be he'd stop eating the moment he saw me with a gun. Even love, at the peak of its animal intensity, could not disrupt our hunting contact. This happened soon after I brought Kate home to live; she was in heat, and so Yarik had to be packed off out of harm's way to share the barn with the hound Solovei. Taking no notice of Kate's condition I continued to train her in the forest and the marshes, as there was hardly any danger of encountering other dogs, living as far away from the village as I did.

Once, reflecting on the strength of the hunting instinct in dogs, I decided to make a risky experiment and take Yarik and Kate together. There was a double risk involved: first Kate, a German pointer, might get mated with my Irish setter in the shrubs somewhere and present me with an unwanted litter of bastards; and she had already missed two hunting seasons, and if she were to miss one more she would remain untrained. Still, I was so carried away by my psychological diggings in the canine soul, that I did risk the experiment, and let Yarik and Kate go together first in the open field and then in the shrubbery. I had several minutes of well-warranted anxiety when the two dogs vanished in the shrubs and did not come back. I rushed after them, did not find them, ran round the whole circle where they might be, called and whistled, and still they did not come. And then,

losing all my self-control, I went running haphazardly through the shrubbery, cursing my blasted experiment. Luckily, Kate's coffee-and-white coat flickered before my crazily searching eyes, and by following her I also discovered Yarik. He stood, as though cast in bronze, his eyes fixed on some birds, invisible in the grass, and behind him stood Kate, completely baffled as hunting did not mean a thing to her yet, dripping drops of thick red blood on the grass and the flowers. And yet they had plenty of time to set quite a different scene for me. This proved that I was right: hunting dogs are really hunting dogs because the art of hunting, from which they do not profit in any way, means more to them than this mightiest of passions which makes the world go round.

I come home feeling happy after this experiment which gives me the courage to confess: once in my life I, too, missed my Kate because of an engrossing passion to attain some invisible goal... I was happy to learn that this can happen not only to people but even to animals of the highest order.

I had to keep Yarik in the barn with Solovei a few days longer, but I often visited him, fondled and called him by quite another, human name, and Kate I also fondled and called Katyusha. This was my own invention, giving my dogs double names, one at work and one at home, the first demanding instant obedience and the second permitting the dog to lord it over the master for a while. It was pretty hard, I can tell

you, to remain the stiff old teacher when Yarik sprawled on the windowsill, his front paws folded, and his red hair glowing in the sunlight with truly Titian hues which modern artists simply cannot render. And in a moment like that I'd say to him:

"Ricky, my darling boy! "

He would not so much as stir, and on the contrary would freeze even harder in his proud pose, understanding perfectly that I was relishing his beauty.

But then if I said: "Yarik! " no matter how softly, he'd do something with his ears, grin, uncross his beautifully folded paws, and start weeping the floor with his fluffy tail, thumping at every sweep.

After that experiment in the forest when Kate was in heat, I had a long man-to-man talk with Yarik in the barn, but I noticed a certain aloofness in his proud manner. When Kate was over her period and I brought him into the house once more, Yarik's behaviour underwent a change. Say, soup was being poured into the dogs' bowls. This familiar sound alerted Kate and she'd stand waiting and flicking her stump of tail. In the old days Yarik usually came hurrying, but now he went on lying in a corner and took no notice of the sound: he was very proud and did not like to come without being asked. But even when I actually called him, he got up most reluctantly. In the old days, when we were eating dinner Yarik would hover near, waiting for a tidbit, and now

he lay under the table, while Kate did the hovering instead and watched all our movements so tensely that it disgusted me and I'd tell her to get out. However, even without Kate there, Yarik never came near the table as before, and we, the whole household, knew that he was not the old Yarik and that he'd never forgive us for bringing Kate into the house.

When hunting time came, and I had that trouble with Kate, I went out with Yarik again. He assumed his former position in the house, came first at the sound of food being ladled into the dogs' bowls, and sat near the table during our dinner, while Kate stood behind him, wagging her stump, and eyeing us with such an unpleasantly clever look that very often she was told to go back to her place. Towards the end of the season, Kate displayed such unexpected superiority that hunting with Yarik became dull in comparison. I was enchanted with Kate's calm, intelligent work. I decided to shift to pointers altogether and get some pups from Kate. In our locality the only suitable husband for my Kate could be Jack who belonged to Boris Ivanovich, my artist friend. During the migration of the double snipe we decided to introduce the dogs and see how they got on. Everything worked out splendidly. Very often, forgetting to be in readiness to fire, we watched those clever dogs go their different ways to search, come together again, stop at the scent, follow it and point, glancing back at us and telling us to hurry up if we were wasting time, admiring them. After

the shoot, Boris Ivanovich and I lit a fire on the shore of the lake, made tea and chatted about the future offspring of our pointers. The dogs, tired out, curled up on the ground. They could sleep tight and not worry their heads like people, with questions of life on God's earth: we were their gods, and their fate was in our hands.

Once, when the boys and I were alone at home, and Kate started playing with Yarik we allowed them to run around the dining table, overturn chairs, jump on to the sofa, soil the tablecloth when they pulled it off together with the teacups, and even lap our drinking water when they got hot and thirsty. Their wild behaviour excited us, and we decided to watch their playing till the end. At first, when Yarik's frenzy overstepped the limits, he would flop on the floor and lie on his back with his legs up. Kate would then fall on top of him and tousle him so mercilessly that he lay there, utterly enfeebled, hanging out his tongue and panting. But once Kate, nimble and lithe as a snake and with no end of mischief in her, drove him so mad that suddenly he leapt up, mounted her, clutched her with his forelegs, and shifted into position. For a second Kate wondered, and then baring her teeth and snarling she went for him and bit him hard. Yarik, with his tail hanging and looking somehow crumpled and shabby, went to his mattress, lay down, and for a long time gazed fixedly at a chair leg with his human dark-circled eyes.

The next day he left her advances without

response, she pestered him affectionately but he only snarled gruffly. She took no notice of his snarl and jumped over him, pulled at his ears, his tail, and tousled him so hard that his red fur went flying. Now, Yarik had a certain trick: when we dangled a piece of bread tied to the end of a thread over his nose, teasing him, he would feign indifference to our antics, but actually he would be measuring the distance and calculating, and when he suddenly made his bounce he invariably caught the bread. It was the same now with Kate pestering him: he calculated everything correctly and only overlooked one thing that he would never get what he was after if her time for it had not come. She gave him a good hard bite. Think of the humiliation for such a proud dog: to be rejected and bitten that first time, trying again in spite of her sharp teeth, and being viciously rejected again! She made him go back to his corner, of course, and there he came to his senses and probably saw himself through her eyes—a common dog, a sorry thing, badly bitten and humiliated. He lay there all day licking his wounds, and at night he paced the floor. I woke up, thinking that he needed to go outside, I let him out and when he returned he started pacing the floor again. Through my light sleep I heard his claws tapping on the dry floorboards all night long.

In the morning I noticed certain signs in Kate, wrote down the date, and put Yarik away in the barn with Solovei. Everything took place

according to instructions on the care of pedigree dogs. On the eleventh day Boris Ivanovich came to my place with Jack, and we had them mated. Their love, we timed it, lasted fifteen minutes.

The winter held its own with morning and evening frosts. Snow fell at night, but the wind blew it off our hill and it glistened in the sun like pure silver. New, summer clouds became massed above the snow, the blue sky showed through the bare branches in the forest, the crows were cawing their heads off, all the tomtits to the last one were singing in mating voices, and menstrual blood appeared on the vixens' footprints.

The sixty-three-day canine pregnancy was almost over. Kate's time was nearing. Even her smallest top nipples had swelled, and all of them together stood in a ridge, little by little growing to look like the marvellous teats of the fabulous she-wolf who had suckled Romulus and Remus. Kate did not look ugly even in those last days, because the change was only in her heavy belly and it was near the ground, where it was proper and good. We bought a lot of bones, cooked a strong broth, mixed in some oatmeal porridge, and let her eat as much as she wanted. But Kate could never finish what we gave her. And then Yarik appeared from under the bench, came up very cautiously and finished what remained. Altogether he had become subdued and sort of shy. He lay on the sunlit windowsill the livelong day in the pose of a lion with his paws

folded, probably dreaming of the birds' spring migration, which was not long in coming now. I also spent a lot of time sitting at the window and very often, without thinking of Yarik at all, I turned my head this way and that together with him, depending on what was going on outside. I had conceived a new plan of training dogs, with all the teaching done in complete silence, and all the instruction given by looks and gestures. Now, if this could be achieved, one would come near to a complete understanding of their mentality. Then, perhaps, I'd learn to understand their love and would be able to describe Yarik's feelings during Kate's pregnancy.

While I was thinking all these many and different thoughts, turning my head together with Yarik after the moving blue shadows thrown on the snow by the cumuli, Kate had been looking for me. She found me at the window, ran to me and lay down at my feet. She was asking me to do something for her. When I got up, she ran to the door. I took her outside, she did her business quickly and went back. I stayed out in the yard for some minutes, and when I returned indoors the first thing I heard were some peculiar sounds coming from Kate's room: she was very loudly lapping and licking something. I went in and saw, lying beside her, a tiny, blind puppy with coffee-coloured spots on white, exactly like his mother's. There was no need for us to help her: Kate did everything herself with her tongue, she bit through the cord, swallowed

the after-birth, and licked the pups so thoroughly that the white on them was as white as first snow. Everything went well, and only at the fifth pup the whites of her eyes turned blue, and she all but collapsed with no more strength left. We gave her a little wine, and she produced the last, sixth puppy, and fortunately it was our anxiously awaited Remus. We needed male pups especially, and there were only the two in the litter—Romulus and Remus.

It took Kate a few minutes to clean herself up, and then everything was ready, there was not a spot anywhere, and the cleanly licked blind puppies were already climbing over one another with little squeaks, knowing where to crawl, finding what they were after, and beginning to suck. Come and look in silence in the mother's eyes, no words must be spoken...

And so we stood and looked, and abruptly the blissful scene changed: Kate started up, her eyes flashed with ferocity, and her hair stood up on end from neck to tail. We turned round and saw Yarik standing in the door: he, too, had come to have a look. It's a good thing that he turned to go quickly enough and Kate sank her teeth into his hind leg and not his throat. He ran squealing, and she pursued him all the way to the kitchen. When she came back, she lay down, a shiver ran over her body in ripples, and the trembling went on all day.

We had guests to tea, and I told them about canine love, I told them how Yarik had stood there like a graven image, pointing at invisible

game and taking no notice of Kate who was dripping blood on the grass and how they played together for a whole month that winter. I also told them about Jack, and Kate's inexplicable viciousness when Yarik also wanted to have a look and poked his head round the door.

"Why inexplicable?" said one of the ladies who was very wise in matters of love. "If I had a Yarik like him I'd tear him to pieces."

"But what has he done?" I asked. "After all it was we, the dogs' gods, who changed the course of their love and substituted Jack for Yarik."

"Gods can also err," she said. "It's not what he has done, but what he hasn't done. Yarik had such a marvellous chance in those shrubs, but like a fool he remained engrossed in his invisible aim."

NERLE*

1

We had expected the event on the fourteenth, but in the late afternoon of the twelfth I noticed signs which indicated that it might take place that very night, and so off I ran to the chemist's for sublimate and carbolic acid, while my wife went to the barn for straw. By the time I came back the heap of straw was in the kitchen. I

*English translation ©Progress Publishers 1976.

sprinkled it with sublimate, made a bed of it in the corner and fenced off that corner with a log which I nailed to the wall lest it roll away. Our Kate watched these preparations intelligently, knowing their meaning from last time and waited patiently. As soon as I finished, she stepped over the log and curled up on the straw.

We were not mistaken. That very night Kate brought forth a litter of six pups, three bitches and three males. The three females were smaller than their brothers and had exactly the colouring of their mother, a German pointer with big coffee-coloured spots and a lot of small specks on white. One of the bitches had a kopeck-size brown spot on the pate, another had two kopeck-spots, and the third had no spots on the white pate, and she was noticeably smaller and weaker than her sisters. The males took after Tom, their father: the spots were darker, two of the pups had no specks for some reason and the third, much bigger than the others, was speckled so densely that he seemed dark all over, and generally was rather heavy and oak-like. The name "Doubets"* crossed my mind. The Doubets was a river on which I had gone after wood-grouse broods. The hunt had been highly successful and I thought that the word had cropped up in my mind quite opportunely and that it would not be a bad idea to call my new dog Doubets in memory of

*From the Russian *doub*, an oak. —*Tr.*

those fine hunting grounds. It was high time we stopped giving dogs traditional names and started calling them after our own local things—after all, every brook and hillock in this land had got its name without recourse to Greek mythology.

I had decided to keep one bitch and one male from that litter. As soon as the word Doubets flashed across my mind, I found a name for the bitch too: I would call her Nerle, for I had flushed many great snipe on the marshy banks of that river the year before.

But there was also something else that attracted me about that strange and capricious river. It ran such a winding course that in places I could have reached with my oar from one twist across dry land to the next. I was going downstream in a flat-bottomed boat using the oar to guide it along and to avoid running into the swampy bank, pushing and rowing alternately. Ahead of me I could see a church. It seemed to be quite close, then the river turned off in the opposite direction and the church disappeared. After yet another bend I discovered it again, much farther away than last time. I could hear a young shepherd learning to play a birch-bark pipe. As I twisted my way along, the sound rose or fell, but it was always the same shepherd playing the same melody and making the same mistakes. By lunchtime I reached the village, to discover that it lay quite some distance from the river bank and that I had no business there. I rested on the bank. The shep-

herd had stopped his piping. When I resumed my journey the piping started all over again and pursued me till evening. Only when the sun was setting I had a bit of grace granted me: the river straightened out and led me far away from the village, and here, between the steep wooded banks, the singing of birds asserted itself over the haunting remembrance of a halting melody. The current was very swift here, and the boat was gliding along nicely. All I had to do was hold the oar fast. My glance did not miss the pike that swam past, the blue dragon-fly on a blade of grass, a family of snipe perched on the edge of a half-sunken rotting boat, a broad leaf of some water plant sparkling in the rays of the setting sun, and the reeds bowing me along on the taut stream. What a fruitless day on the river and what an enchanting one: I will never forget it and will never cease loving it.

Oh, wild and wanton Nerle, I will give your name to a live dog for whom the greatest happiness will be to gaze lovingly at man, even when he becomes entangled in the twists of his life.

2

Ever since my pups had been born I had been taking my meals in the kitchen: while eating, I could watch the little animals and ponder on their destinies. Below me swarmed a speckled world of blind beings, and above them, the eyes of the mother gazed on me eternally trying to penetrate my thoughts and

read their future—but I was not omnipotent either. I did not yet know in whom I should eventually be able to embody the names Doubets and Nerle. I knew very well that weight and shape were not the only things that counted in a hunting dog. They had to have, first of all, what we shall agree to call intelligence, and it was impossible to recognise this quality at once in the blind offspring of my beautiful Kate. My dog must be intelligent above all, for even weakness of scent can be compensated for by a ready understanding of my guidance, and with a dog like that you will bag more game than with a silly, though sharp-nosed one.

So I had my lunches, suppers and teas, thinking my thoughts, chatting with my wife and watching the puppies all the time. Even reading a newspaper I would still hear the sleeping pups having dreams: though they hardly ever emitted anything but squeaks in their waking hours, in their dreams they were already barking like regular little dogs. But I laid the paper aside as soon as they woke up and started their highly interesting struggle for survival. Every pup then used all of his strength, intelligence, nimbleness and cunning to gain possession of the back, most milky teats. As soon as the mottled tangle of little dogs came awake, they threw themselves into attack on the teats. They scrambled over one another, some finding themselves underneath and lying prone under the weight of the upper layers, the least

lucky ones, rolling off the heap, with their pink piglet-like tummies up, righting themselves after a while and then starting the climb all over again. Some even emitted their own special "hurrah" when dashing into attack and their own special squeal in case of failure, and those who got hold of the large teats champed their lips with pleasure and satisfaction—everything was very much like with people fighting among themselves for their daily bread. Of course I could have let the weak and the strong nurse separately. But how was I to tell the weak from the strong? Today the ones who had stronger muscles took the upper hand, tomorrow those who had better intelligence might snatch the prize from the big but stupid one. So I suppressed my pity for those who looked weaker and decided that I would let nature take its course until I discovered which was my Nerle.

The smudgy pup, who had suggested the name Doubets to me, had become so strong in the very first few days that it now took him no time at all to toss aside all the others and get hold of the best back teat. After that, hanging on to it like grim death, he would stay put, champing away contentedly and paying no attention to his brothers and sisters lying on him in two tiers. The one who got the worst deal was the little bitch with the white pate. She never got anything but the upper tiny teats and so, obviously, always went hungry.

In the eyes of dogs we are, of course, real gods; Olympians sitting round the table, eating

and discussing the fate of their dogs. My wife and I argued a lot. She was sorry for the little bitch and kept saying that she looked more like the mother than any of the others, that she was wonderfully well-shaped and that our duty was to interfere and not to let her grow feeble from undernourishment. Compassion helped her to discover new charms in her favourite every day and tempt me with them. It was hard enough to withstand the assaults of my wife who wouldn't let me carry my plan through, and then one day another Goddess of Pity came to her aid on our Olympus. She was a friend of ours, a woman frail in body but strong in spirit. She and my wife joined forces at once and began to plead with me for the weak animal. I hold Anna Vassilievna (that was the goddess's name) in high regard, and it took all I had to repulse the attack.

"Don't be too liberal with your pity," I said, "save it for people. Remember that others simply drown unwanted puppies, and I have a plan for choosing a friend with due respect for the laws of nature. All too often we do more harm than good with our misplaced pity."

Anna Vassilievna tried to take my own reasonable point of view.

"But the little dog costs a lot of money, and if you persist in your experiment you will lose both the pup and the money."

I did not believe that Anna Vassilievna, a notorious despiser of money, could be bringing

up this point in good earnest, and answered curtly to put an end to the argument:

"I don't care about the money. And let the little dog die if that is her lot. Save your pity for people—in that world,"—I pointed to the heap of puppies, "death is not feared, but accepted as release granted by nature."

We sat down to our lunch in silence. My wife gave Anna Vassilievna lenten fare—mushrooms and cranberry jelly. I am all for people observing the Lent—my own steak tastes especially good when others eat vegetables and fish. So I eat my steak and heartily support the Lent.

I apologised to Anna Vassilievna for my steak and in order to mitigate the impression of my harsh words on the subject of pups, started telling her about the many ulcers which were cured by the enforced fasting in the post-revolutionary years of famine and economic dislocation.

By the time we were half way through our lunch, the pups had had their fill of milk and began yawning and climbing one on top of the other for their usual sleeping pyramid. To make them warm and comfortable, we covered the pyramid with my old hunting jacket, and the mother, finally released from her duties, could now go into her corner to the bowl of oatmeal soup. Kate finished her meal before we did, returned to the nest and lay down beside the pups.

An argument, which has not been carried to its conclusion, and a forcefully arrested train

of thought goes on in our minds, and because there is no repressing thought a new pretext appears, as if by a miracle, for the argument to be continued and clinched.

We were talking about the good effects of fasting, watching the nest all the while. Suddenly some movement became apparent under the jacket. It was very cautious and unobtrusive, and then a head with a white pate emerged from under the jacket, followed by the graceful body of the little bitch about which there had been so much sword-crossing. All the other puppies were fast asleep, giving bark-like squeals from time to time. There could be no doubt that the little bitch was on a venture all her own. At first we thought she was crawling away from the nest to move her bowels, as all puppies do. But no, she made straight for her mother and seized the back teat. We could actually see her tummy swell out and finally the little bitch fell asleep against her mother's belly, much more comfortable than her brothers and sisters under my hunting jacket. The whole performance staggered us: there we had been arguing about pity, and the pup had found the solution on her own and was lying there sated and content.

"There you are, Anna Vassilievna," I said triumphantly, "haven't you told me yourself that in the hard struggle for existence you had won the kind of happiness which the well-provided for and the sated cannot even dream about, and that for this you are prepared to bless even those who were out to do you harm.

Can you imagine then how this pup must bless me for not letting you feed it, thus prompting it to find the simple solution with its own, just awakened little mind! "

3

In the evening, when the puppies woke up and went into assault on the teats, the little bitch with the white pate took no part in the scramble. The next morning I found her sleeping at her mother's belly again. We were overjoyed. Not daring to acknowledge her as my Nerle for this exploit alone, I started calling her Anna Vassilievna. In a matter of several days our little Anna Vassilievna became much bigger and plumper, and we noticed that she was steadier on her feet than any of the other pups. She had also developed a new trait—she went exploring the nest, on trips that took her further and further away from her mother. All the other puppies only knew two ways of life—sleeping and fighting for the teats. Anna Vassilievna had found a way to exclude the crude fight for existence from her life, her strength increased with every day and my wife and I were happy to see her use the released energy for the satisfaction of her curiosity.

Anna Vassilievna's travels ended at the foot-high log that separated the nest from the rest of the kitchen. Once she reached it she could only put her front paws on the log and peer at the expanse of the kitchen floor as we do at

the expanse of fields and meadows. Her mother would go off into that expanse, do something at the bowl and come back. Anna Vassilievna started waiting for her mother to return, and when she came back and lay down, the puppy would embrace her muzzle and lick her nose thus getting a taste of the oatmeal soup. And then one day, when Kate was lapping up the soup, Anna Vassilievna started whining. Kate left the bowl, returned to her daughter, pushed her onto her back with her muzzle and, apparently thinking that the pup had difficulty in moving her bowels, began massaging her tummy with her tongue. The puppy grew quiet and the mother returned to her bowl. But as soon as the mother went off, Anna Vassilievna propped herself against the log again and resumed her whining. Kate looked round at her in puzzlement, glanced at me questioningly and started whining as well.

Her eyes said: "Can't imagine what is wrong. Won't you help, master?"

I said to her: "Never mind."

This meant: "Pay no attention, eat your soup. There's no need to spoil the pup." Kate did as she was advised, and the daughter, indignant at her mother's inattention, jerked herself up, plumped over the barrier and made for the bowl at a fast waddle.

It was a most amusing sight, the mother and the daughter at the bowl: Kate is not a very big dog, but now, beside a smaller copy with the same coffee-coloured spots, the same cropped

tail and outstretched neck, she looked huge, with her large pink udder. The tiny Anna Vassilievna tried to do as her mother did but all she could achieve was licking the rim of the bowl! She found this not nearly satisfying enough and so rose on her hind legs, with the forepaws hanging over the rim of the bowl. She probably imagined it was yet another barrier, and if she pushed herself over it, the secret of the bowl would be disclosed to her. So she made the same risky movement as a moment before at the log and fell plop into the bowl of oatmeal.

By then Kate had eaten a good half of the soup, so Anna Vassilievna was in no danger of drowning. Soon she emerged without her mother's help, covered with yellowish oatmeal from head to foot. She waddled back to the log and started whining. Doubets chose this moment to wake up and hearing somebody whine behind the log went there to investigate. By then the little Anna Vassilievna had risen on her hind legs and the next moment—she dropped sack-like on the other side of the barrier straight on to Doubets. Her brother sniffed her, then gave her a lick and obviously liked the taste.

The thing that amazed us most was that when the next day Anna Vassilievna crawled out from under the jacket she was followed by Doubets, who walked after her to the barrier, climbed over it, waddled to the bowl, put his front paws into the oatmeal and started lapping it up. It appeared that Anna Vassilievna's first journey to the

bowl was tantamount to Columbus's discovery of America in our human history. As we know, Columbus was followed to America by all and sundry. The same happened with the pups. The little bitch with the white pate had taught Doubets, and because he was so big and there was plenty of food on him when he was smeared all over with oatmeal, the two little bitches, one with a kopeck piece on the pate and the other with two kopeck-pieces, started licking him. Soon they got the hang of the thing and learned to make the trip to the bowl too. The two males, however, with white unspeckled heads and pink muzzles kept apart from the jolly company for a long time yet, having no inkling about the discovery of America. We had to take the two savages to the bowl and push their noses in, keeping them there, until they saw light and started eating. Nerle was also the first to recognise our signal, "tu-tu-tu", for the feeding, Doubets following suit, followed in his turn by the other two bitches. The two stubborn savages with pink muzzles took the longest to take the hint. Then one day, when we were having dinner, the entire company in the nest woke up feeling hungry. Nerle, abandoning her whining brothers and sisters, ran up to Mount Olympus and began pulling at the God's trousers and skirts, thereby leaving no doubt in our minds that the small graceful dog with the white spot on the pate was the eagerly awaited and planned for Nerle.

WHITE RAINBOW

Has anybody ever seen a white rainbow? It does happen in bogland on the clearest days. When the mist rises in the pre-dawn hour and the rising sun pierces it with its rays, all the mist there is becomes condensed in the shape of a rainbow, a very white one, sometimes with a rosy and sometimes with a cream tint. I love this white rainbow, it makes me think of a young mother with her breasts full of milk.

That morning, the white rainbow started from the wooded floodland, arched over our hill and came down into the swampy valley where I was going to train Nerle.

The rye was turning brown. Because of the constant rains the meadow flowers were unusually bright and gorgeous that year. In the wet alder bushes which sprayed me with water I soon found a path to the marshes and along it I could see far ahead: there, wading through the flowers a most ordinary Berendei with a long smoky beard was descending into the valley. I stood enraptured with the valley and the sight of the curlews striding over it, and was unable to make a move until Berendei had vanished in the surrounding shrubs. And then I too, wading like Berendei through the gorgerous flowers, among which there were some stinging nettles too, descended into the damp, hummocky dell, covered with puny, crooked birches, that ran along the swamp and ended at the water-meadow. To me it seemed a wonderful place for the

nesting of snipe and double snipe. I was just going to search among the hummocks, when suddenly, high above the green valley I heard the cry I longed to hear, which sounded like the rhythmical squealing of the empty pail handle when someone goes to fetch water. Ca-chou-ca-chou cried the snipe as it descended into the valley. I noted the exact spot where it alighted, and led Nerle there on her leash, feeling a surge of excitement. The grass was very tall all about me, but it grew lower and lower towards the spot I had marked until there was only some yellowish moss on the boggy patch. The snipe had to be somewhere about. I set my dog against the wind and let her gulp a mouthful of it. Meanwhile my brain, for some reason, was busy exploring the relationship between man and dog. When a dog is slow to learn, the trainer can lose control so utterly that he'll just stand there yelling without rhyme or reason while the dog runs madly about the swamp after the birds. In this case man has less sense than dog. But it also happens that a dog not only hears and understands the man's words but stops for a moment if the man heaves a sigh remembering something, and looks into his eyes as if asking him to share the painful thought. That's how humanised a dog can become. And in this case man and dog are equals. My Nerle is only half-trained, and unleashing her so near the snipe I was afraid that on this morning with the white rainbow in the sky she would drive the kind and thoughtful person I always tried to be clear out

of me. And in the same worried breath I comforted myself with the hope that I had not been mistaken in my choice of dog, that the all but impossible would happen, and this very first time Nerle would understand the smell of the snipe and take up the scent. Alas no, either she could not scent the bird, or it wasn't anywhere near this bald spot of ground at all. Wondering about the vanished snipe, I remembered Berendei and thought: was it he who had flushed the snipe? Just then I heard someone shouting:

"Hey you, greybeard! "

And there was Berendei himself with his long, smoky beard, leaning on his scythe with one hand and with the other pointing at a small spit, overgrown with puny, crooked birches. All at once the whole thing became clear to me: on passing that spit, Berendei had frightened off the mother-snipe, who abandoned her brood, and soared high up for a moment only to return to the nest at once. I must have seen it on the descent. As I approached, the mother-snipe must have started running between the hummocks, sky-scrapers to her, back to her brood. I've watched all these maneuvres lots of times, and this time I guessed right too: just as I stepped on the spit, she soared up with a loud cry and dropped into the swamp grass and out of sight not far away. The mother-snipe feel perfectly at home in the dark, mysterious passages between the hummocks, invisible to us; they run about freely, soar up to take a look at us when they feel like it, come down

somewhere near and give warning to their young.

There is a small pool in the sedge with streaks of a darker green converging upon it: these are invisible streams running under the grass. The sedge thins out near the water, and round the pool there is a width of open mud of immense value to snipe in their nocturnal life: they poke in it with their long bills and using them like tweezers grip and pull out worms. There are water-lilies in the centre of the pool, and in the daytime the ducks alight on the stems, coiled into rings. It was here, near the pool, that we discovered the whole brood: there were four young snipe in all, as big as their mother, but slow to soar up. Putting Nerle on the leash, I made her go to the spot where a young snipe had come down, I noticed. We trampled down more grass than I care to say but found nothing, not even that young bird. After this I went to the other side of the pool, where another young snipe had alighted, I messed up the grass and again found nothing. Wearied by this long and fruitless effort, I paused for a smoke and let go of the leash as I lit my cigarette. In that precise moment when my whole attention was concentrated on the tip of my cigarette and the flame of the match, I suddenly sensed that something had happened outside of my range of vision. And this is what I saw: a young snipe, like a limp little rag, was flying past me not ten paces away, and Nerle was watching it from the grass in utter astonishment. It still

did not occur to me why the bird appeared just when I let go the leash and busied myself with lighting my cigarette. The link in my thinking which corresponded to the mounting awareness of the dog had fallen out, and that's why what followed took me by surprise.

At this moment I am not walking about the swamp, I am jotting down the links of my, I make bold to say, creative thinking. Surely I may call it creative thinking if it will enable me to make our common wealth the richer for one more hunting dog? I saw Berendei cutting the grass while I worked with the dog and watching me when he stopped to rest. I felt respect for his work, he was also creating, his material was grass. And what about Nerle? I'll show you in a minute that she, too, was creating, and her material was snipe. And snipe also had their own creative work, their worms, and so ad infinitum into the depths of the biosphere, where death on one side results in creation on the other.

In the distance I heard the whistle of the floating excavator, which was moving slowly upstream, coming ever nearer our swamps in order to drain them, dry them out and make my artistic work in these parts unnecessary and senseless.

I was tired, and the whistle of the machine was about to change my mood of a creator who was confidently and joyously working with his materials, into the despondent feeling of someone who himself, sooner or later, would

have to surrender to the inevitable and become "material" for someone else. I fancied that the old man who, knee-deep in water, was cutting sedge to feed his only cow in winter, was watching my useless occupation with a mocking smile.

And suddenly ... no, the whole point is that it was not suddenly at all. It happened only because I wanted to smoke and had let go of the leash. For years and years the forebears of my pure-bred Nerle had been held in the power of man who divided up between them the dog's natural urge to creep up to the game, pause to make the jump, and grab. The dog was to stop, her business was pointing, while the jump the man took upon himself—the jump was his shot which got the game far more surely than the dog's grab. Years and years of cultivation taught the pointer to point at the game it had found, it was in its very blood now, and the job of the trainer was merely to remind the dog competently of what it was meant to do. And I, I had not been reminding my Nerle of this, I had only been putting her off by tugging at the leash. And the moment I dropped it and left her free, she instantly found the young snipe. It was this sense of freedom in action, as necessary for a dog's as for a man's creativeness, which was the link I had missed. I am recapitulating it all now. When, in freedom, she had scented the young snipe, she could not immediately decide which of her inherited techniques to employ, she came too near the bird and

flushed it up. She lifted her head high above the grass to look after the flying snipe, but the breeze brought her some new smell from elsewhere, she twitched her nostrils, glanced at me quickly and seemed to remember something...

She started towards the pool, sort of feeling her way along very warily, exactly the way the blindfolded walks in a game of blindman's buff. There, in the mud, there were lots of prints made the previous night. I would have been glad if she had followed the scent left by the snipe who had flown away at sunrise. It would have sufficed me if she had stopped at the prints, with one leg bent, and frozen to a standstill. But she did more than that: turning her head to me she begged with her eyes:

"There's something very serious here, I've never known anything like this before, come and help, only don't hurry, don't squelch, because I can't move, I don't know why."

When I came very close to her at last, she trembled nervously, feeling self-conscious and shy, and seemed to ask:

"Have I done anything wrong?"

I stroked her, and peering with my hunter's eye saw something which she'd never make out: a small snipe was sitting on the round, rusty-coloured island, no larger than the seat of a chair, between two branches of a small stream struggling through the dark, thick grass to the pool. What caught my attention at once were the two golden lines, as though embracing

a bottle towards its neck and ending in a long bill, clearly seen against the water beyond, and it was only these converging golden lines and the bill that betrayed the otherwise invisible rusty-feathered bird.

Nerle had not stirred. I felt wonderful! I glanced at Berendei. Leaning on his scythe this other creator was watching me intently. I indicated Nerle with a gesture to tell him:

"Look, I had not toiled the whole morning for nothing, see her pointing?"

He dropped his scythe and spread out his hands, meaning:

"I marvel at you, I honestly do: that dog is worth a lot of money now."

I heard the whistle of the excavator again, but what did it matter to me now that one day soon this swamp would become dry land, when that morning I had grasped the secret of creativeness, whatever the material. Never mind if all the swamps were drained. I shall create hunting grounds, never known in nature before, and people them with countless birds with long bills and beautiful nocturnal eyes.

THE CHASE

Fyodor, a hunter, came to see me from Ramenye. That village is quite near Moscow, a couple of hours by train, but there are still some real hunters there who hunt fox, hare, squirrel and marten all winter long. They're

busy men, and among them there is this Fyodor, a cobbler. His hunting brings him in less than his cobbling, of course, but to each his own passion, so to say.

Fyodor heard people say that there were a lot of foxes in our parts, and he came to find out if it was true, bringing his dogs along, one called Solovei and the other Reston, a kind of French name. Both dogs were well known to us.

Solovei is a giant of mixed breed: setter, borzoi and mongrel, and the result is a perfect hound. When fox hunting with Solovei you can fire at your quarry if you like, or else you can let the dog chase it around, if it isn't quick enough to go to earth, until it drops from exhaustion, and he won't tear the fur, give you a brief bark to come and finish it off.

The pups he sires look perfect mongrels but they are excellent in work, they hunt hare, fox, marten, they crawl into badgers' burrows and give them the chase deep under the ground with hardly a sound, to the astonishment of anyone who does not know what's going on. It's also very funny.

Fyodor's breed is well known.

Solovei's youngest son who's in his second year is especially clever, but his looks! .. Only fit to be put on a chain in the backyard.

Moscow hunters only shake their heads and say:

"That's no dog." And they call him: "Shaggy."

That't what I call him too, not because like

the Muscovites I look down my nose on Fyodor's breed but simply because I can't bring myself to call this very democratic dog Ariston.

The idea of Greek names must have been planted in Fyodor's mind by a country squire's worldly huntsman, but very soon the "A" was dropped and the name became the French-sounding Reston.

And so, it was on the sixth of October that Fyodor arrived with Solovei and this ginger Shaggy. Our village hunters, everyone who owned a gun of sorts, came in a body and invited themselves to come with us. The non-hunters took the whole thing very seriously and asked us to get a wolf.

The dean of all these village hunters is my neighbour Tomilin, a tinner in his forties with a family of nine. Tinning samovars and pails would not feed all those mouths, and so he started making guns, assembling them from all kinds of scrap and taking particular pride in his springs.

I like to join in these village hunts sometimes, but I alway's keep a good distance away because someone's gun is bound to explode. This happens every hunt. Small wonder, even from afar you can see new soldered patches glinting on the barrels here and there. One of the men even had his hammer on a string: when he fired it flew up and then just dangled. However, no one cares, no one worries that these guns always miss, just so long as they go bang.

What I am afraid of most are the guns which

had remained from the year before with the charge packed in with ramrods. As a rule, at the beginning of the hunt the whole community takes part in discharging them into the air, and then the owner of the gun blows the smoke out and when it gushes out to right and left everyone roars with laughter.

"A sieve, that's what it is! Give it to your woman to sift flour with! "

They make fun of themselves and enjoy themselves no end. Sometimes it's very jolly, and I always imagine what it must have been like in those remote days when whole communities went on a mammoth hunt. Our hunts are more fun, I think. The mammoth, being such a huge animal, put people under a sort of obligation: what we went after was sometimes a hare, no larger than a rat, and there'd be no obligation, just the excitement of the chase and delight worthy of a mammoth. It's so jolly when the hunter with the hammer on a string shakes his fist at the unseen mammoth in the forest and threatens:

"I'll knock the pants off you yet! "

If it were a real mammoth someone would certainly say:

"Mind he doesn't knock *your* pants off."

But here they simply say:

"Mind your hammer doesn't fly away."

And the excitement before the hunt! Tomilin gets up at about two in the morning to see what the weather is like. I can hear him, so I also get up and light the samovar.

Three o'clock in the morning.

Fyodor and I are having tea. Tomilin and his son are also having theirs. Our conversation with Fyodor is about hares and how hard they are to find among the fallen leaves.

Four o'clock.

The tea-drinking continues. We now talk about foxes and how sly they are. Hundreds of examples.

At five o'clock we tackle the problem of how to get a marten out of a tree-hole, and decide that the best thing is to scratch the tree trunk with a ski and the marten will come jumping out, thinking that a man was coming in after it.

Through the window we can see the beginnings of a whitish dawn. The hunters have all gathered outside and are sitting on benches, talking in low voices.

We start off. Luckily, there isn't a single spoilsport among us who set out with the thought that the outing will be a flop anyway, who drag along and become only slightly animated when, contrary to expectations, everything goes well.

We do not even mind the thick whitish haze, and I'm sure none of us would exchange it for a glorious sunrise in spring with the nightingales singing but no hunting for us.

It can only be as lovely as this in late autumn when the darkness of night begins to thin out with an effort after a nocturnal rain, the sun becomes happily outlined, and each tree seems

to be washing itself as the rain drops trickle down it. There is a steady murmur in the forest then, and you keep thinking that someone is stealing up on you from behind. But it's neither friend nor foe, it's simply a forest dweller going home to hibernate.

A snake crawled past me very slowly and lazily, obviously on its way underground. It took no interest in me whatsoever, as it barely moved along, rustling the fallen leaves.

What a lovely smell!

I heard someone saying something, but my hearing must have added some human words to the murmur of the dying nature. Or could it have been a squirrel? I heard the same thing again, and turned to look at the hunters.

They were standing perfectly still and silent, watching for a hare to jump out of the dense fir grove.

But then who could have spoken?

I suppose it was some village women out mushrooming. The forest murmurs were a little unnerving, and they would be cautiously exchanging a word now and then.

And then I heard high overhead: "Keep in line! Keep in line! "

It was not people, it was wild geese encouraging each other as they flew high in the sky. A great wedge of them showed at last in the gap between the golden birches but it passed too quickly to count. I did count one side of the wedge, and when I worked out the sum I got over two hundred in that wedge all in all.

Solovei's brief bark sounded now and again from the thick fir grove. The prints confused him because the night's rain had penetrated the thickets and ruined the hare's track made while feeding.

Our hunters called this thick fir grove a "chest", and were quite certain that the hare was inside it at the moment.

"He's afraid of the dripping raindrops and the falling leaves, he'll never budge now," the men said.

"Nailed down he might be."

"It's not the leaves and dripping that keep him there, he's beginning to turn white, that's what, I saw it with my own eyes—his legs are white and the rest of him is grey."

"Oh well, if his legs have turned white you'll never lure him out of that "chest", he's as good as nailed in."

The trunk of the only tall fir rising above the thickets was cream-white with pitch, and the whole of the "chest" was covered with fallen birch leaves, while more and more came raining down with a soft whisper.

One of the hunters looked at the leaf-covered thickets and yawned.

Tomilin himself also yawned.

Yawning at a hunt, what next!

"Maybe we should help Solovei?" Tomilin said.

He measured the "chest" with his eyes, figuring out whether he'd be able to crawl through or would get stuck, and suddenly all

the others came awake, determined to help Solovei. With whoops they charged at the thickets, the patches on the barrels of their guns glinting in the sun which had just peeped out.

Tomilin, the commander, wedged himself into the very heart of the thickets, and the more painfully he was prickled the louder he yelled. Everybody yelled, wheezed, squealed and yelped: you'll never hear people making such noises anywhere else, and I suppose it was a leftover from the mammoth hunting days.

A shot was fired.

And a crazy shout: "He's coming! "

The first, most difficult part of the hunt was over, it was as if a fuse had been smouldering under a powder-keg for a whole hour and at long last the powder had exploded.

And each hunter had to shout in glad excitement: "He's coming! "

Solovei started baying confidently and quickly, and then he was joined by Shaggy.

In a trice all the young hunters scattered in a blind eagerness to cut off the hare's retreat, and with them came Tomilin, running like an elk, crashing through the undergrowth with youthful energy which you'd never suspect him of.

Hunters like these would never shoot a hare, but maybe that was the least of their worries, it was happiness enough to run at top speed through the forest and chase their quarry.

Fyodor and I, two old birds, exchanged looks

and smiles, listened to the sounds of the chase, guessed which way the hare was going, and stopped where we were, he right in front of the entrance into the "chest", myself a bit further away where the green path branched out into three between the tall old forest and the young thickets.

And no sooner had the noise of Tomilin, a forty-year old elk, crashing through the undergrowth subsided, than the hare's white legs flashed far ahead on the green path, and then the whole of him appeared, leaping straight at me.

I looked at him through the sights of my raised gun: this mammoth was the smallest of the late-autumn hares. On one end of his still short body was a pair of huge ears, and on the other a pair of long legs, such long legs that as he ran the front part of him rose very high and then dropped low.

It was up to me not to let the hare get into the "chest" and not get the dogs stuck there for a long time: therefore, I had to kill this mammoth. I took aim.

The hare sat down.

I don't shoot sitting game, but the hare's end was inevitable just the same: if it came running at me, the aim would shift to the front paws, if it made a side jump, the aim would instantly jump to its nose.

Nothing could save this poor mammoth.

And suddenly...

A ginger head, greyish because it was sprin-

kled with heavy dew, poked out of the fir thickets.

"Shaggy?"

I almost killed him, mistaking him for a fox. But it was not Shaggy, it was a fox!

It all happened in the space of one moment, too quick for the ginger head to poke out further or hide. I fired. Something ginger thrashed in the thickets, and far away there was a flicker of the hare's white legs.

And here the dogs came running.

Fyodor came running. Tomilin, with his gun at the ready, leapt out of the forest, and then all the other hunters came pouring out, the patches on their barrels aglitter. The dogs, restrained by their leashes, tore forward at the fox, barking frenziedly. All the hunters yelled, each trying to outshout the other that he, too, had seen the fox flash past in the thickets. When the dogs had calmed down and the young men stopped shouting, there was only our shared joy left, as though all of us were one happy man.

Fyodor said:

"We drove it out with our noise."

And Tomilin added:

"A foolhardy fox, that one."

ANCHAR

I love hounds, but I hate shouting for them in the forest, running about, crawling through shrubbery, and in general acting like a hunting

dog. My way was to let the dog loose, and make some tea, never hurrying off even when the dog flushed the game: I'd sit drinking my tea and listening, and when I caught the right tone of baying, I'd take my place—bang! and that would be that.

That's how I like it.

I had a dog like that, called Anchar. He has been buried in the gully which runs to the clearing, and a wood goblin stands guard over his grave...

It wasn't I who reared Anchar. A peasant once brought him to me—a big, handsome dog with "spectacle-frames" round his eyes.

"Stolen?" I asked.

"That he is. Only it was long ago, my son-in-law stole him from the nursery when he was a pup, you won't get into trouble now. It's a pure breed..."

"I can tell breed," I said. "And how's he in a chase?"

"Damn good."

We went to try him out.

We let him go as soon as we left the village, and off he flew like the wind.

When we entered the forest the peasant said:

"I've got a chill in my bones, let's start a small fire."

It can't really be, I was thinking. Was he making fun of me? No, he really was gathering fuel, lighting a fire and settling down.

"But what about the dog?" I asked.

"You're young, and I'm old, you haven't seen

all I have, so I'll tell you: don't worry about the dog, he knows his business, while he's out searching we'll have tea." He chuckled.

We had a cup each.

There was a bark.

I started. But the peasant laughed and calmly poured himself a second cup.

There was a bark.

"Let's hear what he's flushed."

The dog bayed without a pause, smartly chasing some quarry.

"He's chasing a fox," the peasant said, reading into the baying.

We had one more cup, while the dog had already done no less than four versts. Suddenly he fell silent. The peasant pointed with a hand and asked:

"Do you people graze cows over there?"

The Karachunovo people did, true enough.

"That fox has got him muddled with those cow prints, he's going to pick up the scent again, so we can have another cup."

But the fox was not to rest for long: Anchar picked up the scent and started chasing her in narrow circles, and now the peasant poured his tea over the fire, stamped it out and said:

"That's when we must hurry."

We ran to the glade in front of the fox holes to cut off our fox's way. Just as we took up our positions, the fox appeared with Anchar hard on its heels. The fox pointed at the swamp with its tail, he did not believe it and grabbed it by the neck, and that was that. He lay down

beside the fox to lick the wound on his leg.

He had a silly name, but I changed it to Anchar and it stuck.

Do you know how a hunter's heart opens out? Think of a morning when frost lies on the grass and there is a mist before sunrise, and then the sun rises and little by little the mist retreats and where the mist had been a bit of blue now shows between the green firs and golden birches, and with every minute the blue turns brighter and the whole world begins to sparkle. That's how a harsh October day opens out, and it is exactly the same with the heart of a hunter.

"My good friend," I said to the peasant. "What misfortune is compelling you to give away such a good dog for money?"

"I'm putting the dog into good hands," replied the peasant. "Mine is the usual peasant's misfortune: my cow died. She must have gulped some frost together with the grass, she got all swollen up and died. And a peasant can't do without a cow, can he."

"I know he can't, and I'm very sorry for you. Now, how much do you want for the dog?"

"It's your cow I want, you have two, give me your piebald one."

And so I bartered my cow for Anchar.

My, what a wonderful autumn I had! In the forest I did not have to keep calling the dog, I did not have to scramble through the undergrowth at the risk of getting my eyes pricked out, I was now free to stroll about slowly and watch the trees turning ever more golden with

every day; or else I'd hunt hazel-grouse. I'd trample down the grass to make little paths, whistle, and the hazel-grouse would come running to me along those paths. Thus passed that golden autumn, and then one frosty morning the sun rose, it grew warm and by midday all the trees had shed their leaves. The hazel-grouse no longer responded to my whistling. The rains came, the fallen leaves began to rot, and November—the saddest month of the year—set in.

It's not my habit to go hunting in the forest in a gang. I like to walk about the forest quietly, pausing and holding my breath at moments, and then every little animal takes me for one of its own kind, I love looking and marvelling at all these living creatures and I kill only what I'm allowed as a hunter. There's nothing I hate more than those gangs yelling and shouting in the forest and killing everything that comes their way. But sometimes a good friend, a hunter of understanding, comes and asks me to take him along, and that's a pleasure for me because a good person I welcome wholeheartedly. At the beginning of November I received a letter from a hunter-friend in Moscow, asking me to take him along on a chase. This man is well known to all of you, so I shan't name him. Naturally, I replied that I'd be very glad to have him, and on the night of the 6th he arrived.

The ground had hardened nicely and then, as ill-luck would have it, it went and thawed out

that very night. There was a chilly drizzle, and mud everywhere. I stayed awake all night, worrying that the rain would wash away the nocturnal tracks and make a mess of our plans. But fortunately the stars came out after midnight, and by morning the hares made a lot of prints.

We had tea before dawn, sat talking for a while and when the sky began to turn blue went out to hunt hares with Anchar.

That autumn the field of winter wheat started all but next to the village, and the wheat stood so thick, solid and succulently green that it looked good enough to eat. The hares gorged on it that autumn so greedily that I got as much as a pound of fat from each one. Anchar picked up the scent gaily, circled about for a little, found his bearings and made straight for the form. At that time of year there's dripping and rustling in the forest which scares the hares terribly, and so they get out into the open and lie down in the clearing opposite the Alexeyev felling forest. As I understood Anchar, he was making for the clearing, or rather the gully, along which the hares were certain to run from the clearing. I placed my friend on the edge of the gully while I went to take up my position on the opposite side. He was there in full view, but he could not see me.

You've got to have a plan in a hunt too, but things rarely work out as planned. We waited and waited, but still there was no sound of Anchar.

"Sergei! " I shouted. Sorry, I wasn't going to tell you this hunter's name, but at least it is not his surname.

"Sergei, blow the horn for Anchar! " I shouted.

I'd given my hunting-horn to him, he's very good at blowing it and loves it. Just as he raised the horn to his mouth, I saw Anchar running towards us along the gully. I understood at once from his gait that he was following the same scent, and I also understood that the hare must have been frightened off by a fox or an owl, and Anchar was almost on it. It was when he came past Sergei that I saw him raising his gun and taking aim...

Nothing would have happened if I had remembered that once I nearly killed a man from that very spot. The man was wearing a hare-fur hat, which was all I could see of him. His whole head came into view just when I was ready to fire.

Had all this flashed across my mind an instant earlier, I would have realized that only a bit of fur was visible from above, and I would have shouted and stopped my friend. I didn't think he meant to shoot, I thought he was training his gun just for the hell of it, city hunters are always getting this itch like restive horses.

And suddenly—bang!

It was very still, the smoke fell into the gully and veiled everything.

My blood ran cold and at once I remembered how once I nearly shot a man in the head from that same spot.

The blue smoke settled on the green floor. I waited and waited, the moments were like years, and still there was no Anchar. When the smoke had dissolved I saw my Anchar sleeping the sleep of the dead on the green grass, as on a soft bed.

...Heavy drops of autumn rain fell from the tall trees down on to the small ones, from the small trees they fell on the bushes, from the bushes they fell on the grass, and from the grass on the ground. They fell with a sorrowful little whisper until they touched the ground, and the ground absorbed all the tears in silence.

And I looked on dry-eyed...

"Oh well, worse things happen, even a man sometimes gets killed accidentally," I was thinking.

I am a burnt-out man, I pulled myself together quickly and got to thinking how to make it easier on my friend, I knew that it was worse on him than me, and we would not be hunters if we did not know how to wash away sorrow. In Tsiganovo liquor is distilled in every cottage, and so we'd go to Tsiganovo and wash our sorrow away. As I was thinking this I watched my friend in amazement: he went down into the ravine, looked at the dead Anchar, returned to his place again and stood there as if still waiting for the chase. What was the matter with him?

"Hello! What did you fire at?" I shouted.

He made no response.

"I say, what did you fire at?"

"An owl," he answered.

My heart sank.

"Did you hit it?"

"I missed."

I dropped down on a stone and suddenly understood all.

"Sergei," I shouted. "Blow the horn for Anchar."

He raised the horn to his lips, and stopped. He made a step in my direction, paused, made one more step and stopped.

"Come on, blow! " I yelled.

He raised the horn.

"Hurry up, blow! "

He was raising the horn to his lips.

"Come on now, come on! "

And he blew it.

I sat on the stone, listening to my friend blowing the horn, and thinking all kinds of nonsense: there was that crow chasing a hawk, now why didn't the hawk turn round and give the crow a good peck on the head, once would be enough. One could sit on that stone forever letting one's mind wander. But what of that man? The question stuck like a bone in my throat.. Why the deceit? Death is the end, everything ends so simply, so why blow a horn for all to hear? Our dog has been killed, there could be no more hunting for us, he shot the dog himself and knows very well that I am human, I shan't call him to answer, I shan't rebuke him by so much as a word... Whom was he trying to deceive?

"Look," I said to him. "Follow that path, it will bring you to Tsiganovo, you and I will have a drink there. And now go and blow your horn from time to time, keep at it, while I'll walk about in the forest and listen, maybe Anchar will respond to the call."

"Take the horn and blow it yourself," he said.

"No, I don't like to blow, the sound sticks in my ears and I can't hear a thing, and I've got to be on the alert for the smallest sound."

Abashed, he asked in a faltering voice:

"And you, where will you be?"

I pointed with my hand to where Anchar was lying.

"He's up against the wall now," I thought. "He's going to admit it now."

Nothing doing! What he said was:

"I wouldn't advise you to go in that direction, there are no trees there, and he couldn't hang himself on a bush."

"Alright," I replied. "I'll go that way. And please don't forget to blow the horn, just keep blowing."

He seemed very glad to hear that I would be going the other way and started blowing. He'd have all of three versts to walk, blowing all the time.

I looked in his wake and said aloud: "With the living many miracles can happen, but with the dead—none. Anchar will not respond. A real hunter looks straight into the eyes of his friend and says: let's have a drink, friend, it's all over."

Whom was he trying to deceive?

I always carry a small hatchet tucked into my belt for emergencies, and with it I now cut off a dead branch, shaped it into a semblance of a shovel and dug a hole in the soft earth. I laid my good Anchar in that hole, heaped earth over him, and covered the grave with the pieces of turf I had cut out. In the burnt-out clearing there was a charred tree, all twisted like a wood goblin, which in the dusk frightened our village women out of their wits. I fetched it, and set it up at the head of Anchar's grave.

I stood there, looking at the goblin, while Sergei went on blowing the horn. "Sergei, whom are you trying to deceive?"

A cold, drizzling rain was falling. The heavy drops fell from the tall trees to the small ones, from the small trees to the bushes, from the bushes to the grass, from the grass to the sod. The whole forest was whispering... The mother-earth silently absorbed all the tears, drinking them up, always drinking them up.

In the mood I was in, all the roads on earth appeared to meet at the dog's grave where stood the wood goblin and regarded me with such profound respect.

"Listen, goblin, hear what I have to say! "

And I pronounced a speech over the grave, but what I said I shall keep a secret.

I felt easier in my mind after that, and went to Tsiganovo.

"Stop blowing that horn, Sergei, it's all over, I know," I said to him. "Whom are you trying to deceive?"

He turned pale.

We had a drink and stayed the night in Tsiganovo.

All of you know that hunter, everyone has his own Sergei to remember.

THE DEATH RUN

More than once I almost perished from the cold in the forest, and even now, when in the dusk I see that grey strip of forest in the distance, a creepy feeling comes over me. But then if, after a fall of dry snow in the night, the morning dawns fair with a light frost, I go off into the forest before sunrise, and there celebrate my own special Christmas, more beautiful than which no one has ever celebrated, I feel sure.

But this time I was not to look my fill at the towering snow castles and listen to my heart's content to the great silence. Solovei, my foxhound, gave me a signal: he hissed, squealed and then gave such a tremendous bark that the sound instantly shattered the silence. He always makes these curious noises when he is following a fresh scent.

I made haste to be there at the glade with the three firs where the fox usually passed; standing under the dark green canopy I watched through the branches. There, Solovei was chasing the fox, getting nearer and nearer.

The vixen—it was a vixen—jumped out of the

fir thickets a bit too far away. She looked red on the white snow, and much like a dog, except for her needlessly luxuriant tail. A smile seemed to flicker across her spiteful face, and with a flash of her fluffy tail the beauty was gone.

Solovei shot out of the thickets after her, and like the vixen he, too, was red-haired, powerful and wild. He went off his head that first time he saw a fox's tracks on the snow, and since then, when on the chase, this good-natured domestic animal turns into a savage, frightening, bloodthirsty beast. No blowing of the hunting-horn, no firing will call him back. He runs, baying at the top of his voice, determined to get the fox or die in the effort. Solovei's madness is so infectious that more than once I came to my senses in a dark, strange snow-drifted forest about eight versts away from home.

Solovei's and the vixen's tracks appeared at the opposite ends of the glade; through the thickets the dog had run by scent, and seeing her tracks had crossed the entire length of the glade and picked up the scent near that small fir tree where the vixen had shown me her tail. I still had some hope that the vixen would turn out to be a local one, that she'd come back and run in small circles here. But very soon the barking went out of my range of hearing and sounded no more: this meant that the vixen belonged elsewhere, she had gone back home and would not return.

This was when my chase began, I would walk, run, following the tracks until I heard

Solovei. Mostly the tracks ran along the edge of the forest glades, the vixen's rounding off the corners and the dog's taking a short cut. I tried to keep straight ahead and made short cuts wherever possible. All I saw was tracks and all I thought about was tracks: like Solovei, I too was a maniac for the day, I too was prepared to go to any lengths.

Suddenly a confusion of tracks appeared on the path before me, mostly hare tracks, and the vixen had plunged right in for a double purpose: to get her tracks smudged and to tempt Solovei away with the very fresh traces of hare's sideways leap. And tempted he was. There were the fresh traces, and there, under that bush, a white hare was certain to be laying low and watching with its shining black eyes. Solovei made a dash. Surely he wasn't going to abandon the vixen and go after that poor little hare?

From this hares' path the vixen's solitary tracks ran to the swamp along the young aspen grove, hopelessly nibbled by the hares, crossed the glade, and here ... hallo, Solovei! He came dashing out of the forest, picked up the tracks again and disappeared after his quarry in a chase to the death.

I fancied I heard Solovei howl. For a moment I stood still and listened: nothing. All was quiet, and in the quiet I thought I caught the whistling of hazel-grouse. The tracks had come out into the open now, they looked blue in the sun, and I could see the blue tracks left by the vixen

and the dog running the length of the field.

She had nimbly slipped under the fence and gone on, and he had tried it and failed. And then he tried to leap over the fence. There were two gaps in the snow on the pole across the top of the fence made by Solovei's huge paws. I knew it now. I did hear right, he did let out a howl when he tumbled off the fence and was obliged to find a way round it. I don't know where he got out, only I did see their tracks converging once more and running away together to the firebrake. For the pursuer this place is a proper nightmare. Once upon a time the peat here became self-inflamed, huge clods of earth were upturned, and the trees collapsed one after the other to lie in crazy tiers, with a new growth sprouting underneath. Even a fox, let alone a man or a dog, could not get through this tangle. The vixen only slipped in for a moment to lead Solovei astray. She ducked under a fallen tree, while he took a swipe at the snow along the trunk and erased the tracks of polecat. Confused by the shower of snow-dust, the vixen and Solovei fell together into a deep hole, but she jumped on to the second tier of fallen firs, scrambled up to the third tier, and ran halfway along a timber, while Solovei kept after her for a little and then fell down. Someone was chopping wood not far away, and had probably seen everything, casually watching the animal now climbing up one after the other, now falling. It was impossible for a man to go up those tiers. And so I made a circle along the edge feel-

ing quite sick with frustration that I could not be like these animals.

Their exit tracks I was not to see, because suddenly I heard Solovei's plaintive, warbling howl from the side of the forest. I ran straight for the sound to help him in the chase, gasping for breath and feeling so terribly hot as if this was the equator and not a freezing forest.

I need not have wasted the effort. Solovei must have managed with whatever it was, and was again out of hearing. Even so I wanted and simply had to find out why he had howled so miserably. A large road runs across the forest. I guessed that the vixen must have come out on to this road, and a sledge then rode right over her fresh tracks. Perhaps it was the painted sledge that was returning now. The men in it with the red-painted noses and rime-covered beards were matchmakers, probably, who had driven to the village for wine. Solovei had come running out after the vixen, but the road was not like the forest where he knew his way about from his ancestors, the wolves, far better then we humans did. In forest matters a man could not teach a dog all the intricacies the wolves know, but this road here was rather recent and nothing was known about it. This straight line was incomprehensible to the dog, and the endlessness of the straight line terrified him. He tried running in the direction whence the sleigh came out, looking about him for fresh tracks of the vixen leaping to right or left. Thus he ran for a long time in the wrong direction, and then

the endlessness of the road frightened him, he sat down by the roadside and howled, calling me to explain the mystery. He had been sitting and howling while I stumbled round the firebrake!

I suppose he then simply rushed blindly in the opposite direction, leaving a mark on the edge of the road when he made off. Further on, the vixen tried to make a sidewise jump, but for some reason changed her mind and came back, leaving a small semicircle of tracks on the snow. Solovei also started along this semicircle, but further on his tracks were erased by the matchmakers returning with the wine. Quite likely I would have missed the place where the vixen jumped off the road into the bushes, if Solovei had not torn in after her and crushed the bush with the full weight of his body. And further on, from the double tracks in the clearing I could see that life and death had again joined in the chase, knocking the white caps of snow off the black tree stumps as they went.

The vixen and the dog did not run straight on for long—animals don't like straight courses—and once again they raced from one glade to another, from one thicket to another.

I was glad to see that the vixen, tired out, tried to sit and rest for a little, and left her mark there.

If I were asked now I'd never be able to say even very approximately where I finally caught up with the chase. There was a tall pine forest and immediately adjoining it a stretch of small

firs and several large glades. Here the tracks became intersected several times over in the same glade. Here I heard the chase coming to a climax. I had no more guesswork to do, I was no longer a pathfinder, I was now to join the mad fray as the third and most terrible participant.

A lot of snowflakes had settled on my gun, I rubbed them off with a finger, and the touch was so stinging that I knew the frost must be gathering force. From behind a small fir I saw the vixen, with her mouth open, going quietly through the thickets. Because of the frost the snow began to creak loudly, but I did not care now, she had no more strength left to dart off on a long run and going in small circles she was certain to come within the range of my gun.

She ventured to come out into the open and run across the glade to the end fir; her tongue was lolling from one side of her mouth, but her eyes were as viciously spiteful as before, which her usual grin was supposed to disguise. In the waiting my hands froze quite stiff, but even if they froze fast to the steel barrels I wouldn't miss her. Now Solovei, making a short cut, suddenly saw her in the glade and pounced. She met him sitting, and she turned her sharp white teeth and grin straight into the frightening mouth of this simpleton. He had been bitten by such sharp teeth many times and it has taken him weeks to recover. He could not make a direct attack and could grab her only if she

started to run. It was not the end yet. She would yet make a feint with a flick of her magnificent tail, and dive once again into the fir thickets where it would begin to grow dark any minute.

Solovei was yelling his head off. They were breathing mouth into mouth. Both were covered with rime, and the steam rising from them instantly turned to crystals.

The creaking snow made it difficult for me to creep up on them, the frost was really fierce. But she was past hearing, she bared her sharp teeth more and more in her grinning mouth. Solovei should not suspect my presence either: if he noticed me he'd pounce, and what if she was aiming at his throat?

Unnoticed by them, I watched from behind a fir branch, and now I had only a little way to go.

The parting ray of the wintry sun slid over the tall pines, lighting up their red trunks for a brief moment, and then all the radiance went out of the day, and no one spoke in a gentle voice:

"Peace to you, dear good beasts."

Suddenly, Father Frost himself seemed to crack a huge nut, and the crackle was as loud as a shot fired in the forest.

All at once everything became confused. I saw a flicker of the magnificent tail, and Solovei dashing off in the wrong direction. My shot crackled close upon Father Frost's, only it was not a rounded sound, it was a harsh crackle with a roll.

The vixen played dead, but I could see her flattened ears. Solovei went at her. She sank her teeth into his cheek, I got her off him with a stick, he now sank his teeth into her back, I stepped on her throat and stabbed her in the heart with my knife. She was dead, but her teeth remained locked on my felt boot. I had to use the barrels of my gun to prize them open.

You always feel ashamed of yourself when you came to your senses after the mad excitement of the chase and sling a poor limp hare over your shoulder to carry home. But chasing and killing this beauty did not dampen the excitement of the hunt for us, and if I let Solovei he would have gone on savaging the dead vixen for a long time.

And so darkness found us still in the forest.

THE SNAKE

Sometimes you happen to notice a small hole at the bottom of a hummock in the swamp. If you blow in a lot of cigarette smoke, a viper will crawl out of another hole in that hummock. On sunny days the viper will curl up on top of the hummock and lie there for hours, taking a sunbath, which is its favourite pastime. Peasants mostly work barefoot in the swamps, and so cases of snake-bite occur in every village. To cows too. For this the peasants have sentenced snakes to death without right of appeal. Everyone kills snakes. The fool hits a snake viciously

again and again, gloating and saying: "Take this and take that! " and then leaves it in the middle of the road. The wise man kills it quickly with his teeth clenched, he says nothing and always buries it, believing that flies and mosquitoes might carry the snake poison to people and cattle.

Out in the swamps one day I met a man and a woman—he was carrying a scythe, and she a rake. The man stopped to talk with me, while the woman went off to do her raking.

"I see three snakes," she shouted to us.

The man broke off a branch, went to his wife and into the bush she indicated.

"Pinned one down, a big one."

He clubbed it with his stick, then calmly took his hatchet, sliced off a hummock, and covered the dead snake with it. This done, he said rather glumly:

"It's the first time in my life that I killed a snake."

I was very much surprised. He did it so matter-of-factly and competently that I could hardly believe him. But I suppose he was prepared, just in case, being a wise man.

The man and wife got down to their work. Coming towards me along the path was an acquaintance of mine, Nikolai Vassilievich by name, who was thought the wisest and finest person in the volost and had for three years running been chairman of the Volost Executive Committee.

I told Nikolai Vassilievich that three snakes

had just been seen here, the largest one had been killed and the two small ones had slipped away.

"Let them live," replied Nikolai Vassilievich. "I always feel sorry for them when people kill them: a snake does not want to sting anyone, it actually flees from cattle, hissing to give warning, but what can it do if it's stepped on the tail?"

This was the first defender of snakes I'd met in my life, and I said with a laugh:

"You seem to be in sympathy with snakes."

"Quite right," he replied gravely. "I am in sympathy with snakes: snakes are innocent and very intelligent, yet we are compelled to kill them."

He was on the point of relating an example of this to me, but my dog had scented game, and we parted.

On a holiday, the village boys were playing football while the grownups sat on benches, watching them, and talking quietly.

"Come and sit down," Nikolai Vassilievich said to me as I was walking past. "I want to tell you how intelligent snakes are."

I sat down and prepared to listen.

"When I was the chairman I had to go to the volost office every day across this swamp. Once as I walked along I saw a snake curled up on a hummock, basking in the sun. I went right up to it. The snake lifted its head and looked at me, and then dropped it once more. I walked off a little way and turned round: the snake had lifted its head and was following me with its eyes. See the intelligence?"

"I'm afraid I don't," I replied.

"Just hear what happened next. The following day I came at the same hour, and there it was, curled up on the hummock again. It lifted its head, and I walked away. This went on for a whole week: as soon as I came up, the snake lifted its head. See?"

"You thought the snake recognised you?"

"Exactly. Once I was walking home with a peasant who was on his way to the forest to look for his cow. As we were passing that particular bush, the peasant all but barged into it, and he was barefoot, mind you. 'Look out, there's a snake there.' I cried. 'How d'you know?'— 'Take a look and see.' And sure enough the snake was there. He wasn't very intelligent, that peasant, he flinched away from me in fear and asked: 'How could you know?' I told him everything, and he said: 'But why didn't you kill it?' And I told him: 'It's only sheep who all act alike. I know this snake, that's why I didn't kill it.' The peasant laughed at me. He laughed a bit, and dashed off to look for his cow, he was a busy man. The next day I looked under that bush and didn't find my snake."

Thinking that Nikolai Vassilievich had finished his story I put in quickly:

"I liked your story, it rings true. In that week the snake could have come to know you, and when that stupid, noisy man came it simply went away."

"Wait a bit, I'm not finished yet," said Nikolai Vassilievich. "The snake couldn't have

gone very far away from its own place, I thought, and was sure to be somewhere near. I went round that bush and, true enough, it was there, on the other side. It lifted its head and recognised me. That day I was coming home with a crowd of people. Mushrooms had sprouted after the rain, and one young chap said:

" 'There's a redcap over there, I'll go and pick it.'

" 'Careful, there's a snake there,' I told him.

"He laughed at my warning, and went anyway. I grabbed him by the sleeve, and showed him the snake. Everyone marvelled and I explained how I knew. And then one very old, white-haired man asked me sternly:

" 'Why didn't you kill it?'

"I told him everything from the very beginning, how I passed here every day, how the snake lifted its head, how it moved to another place after I'd shown it to someone else, and again recognised me.

" 'Snakes are a menace to our cows, and he's playing games, and he's our chairman too! ' the old man said harshly. 'Hold on, fellows.' This to the men who had already picked up sticks to kill the snake.

" 'Hold it, fellows. Let him do it,' the old man commanded.

"And here I said the stupidest thing in self-defence:

" 'I've never killed a snake in my life.'

" 'Hold it,' he said again, stopping the men just in time. 'Our chairman, you see, has never

killed a snake in his life, so let him learn now.'

"What could I do? I killed it. If I'm forced, I'll kill again. But on my account I'll never harm a snake because they're intelligent creatures, they hiss in warning, but the silly cows can't hear and plod on. And our peasants are no better, plunging into the swamp barefoot, the silly fools, when each of them knows how to make a pair of galoshes out of old boot legs."

THE SWAMP

I know that few people have ever sat for hours in the swamps in early spring waiting for the black-grouse to come to their mating place, and the words at my command are too few to give the barest idea of the magnificence of the birds' concert before sunrise. I often noticed that long before light the first note was sounded by the curlew. This was a very delicate trill, quite unlike the whistling we all know. Next, a cry was raised by the ptarmigans, the black grouse started their muttering, and my mind would be taken off the curlew, but later, in that moment of greatest solemnity when the sun rose, I'd always notice that the curlew was singing a new song, a very gay, dance song: in welcoming the sun this song was a must like the cranes' cry.

Once, watching from my cover, I saw a grey curlew-hen setting down on a hummock amid a black mass of cocks, and her mate came flying

to her, waving his large wings to hold himself aloft, touching her back with his feet, and singing his jolly song. And now the very air vibrated with the singing of all the marsh birds at once, and I remember that the water in a stagnant puddle rippled because of the countless insects that had all come to life.

The sight of the curlew's very long, curved bill always transports me in my imagination to the times before the appearance of man on earth. In the swamps everything is so uncanny, swamps have been little studied and overlooked by art, and there you always feel as though man had not even been conceived yet.

One evening I came out with my dogs to give them a bit of exercise. It was terribly sultry after the rain with more rain in the offing. The dogs ran about with their tongues lolling, and now and again flopped on their bellies into the puddles, like pigs. Evidently game birds had not yet been hatched, none came out of the thickets into the open, there was nothing for the dogs to smell although the swamps here abound in game, and for lack of anything better they thought even a passing crow exciting enough. Suddenly a large bird appeared and with cries of alarm started wheeling overhead in large circles. A second curlew came and also started wheeling with sharp cries, then a third curlew, evidently from a different family, flew across the circle of the first two and disappeared. I had to get a curlew egg for my collection and expecting the birds to wheel in narrower circles

as I approached the nest and in wider ones as I moved away from it, I went wandering about with only sounds to direct me as in a game of blindfold. And when the low sun became enormous and red in the copious, warm vapours exhaled by the swamp, I sensed the nearness of the nest: the birds were screaming so desperately and circling so low that I could clearly see, against the red sun, their long, curved bills opened for the continuous, alarmed cries. At long last, both my dogs caught the scent in the air and came to a point. Following the direction of their eyes and noses I came straight upon two large eggs, lying on a strip of dry, yellow moss beside a small bush, without anything like a nest or any form of protection for them. Ordering my dogs to lie down, I looked about me happily. The mosquitoes were biting pretty hard, but I was used to them and actually felt grateful to these twanging demons for guarding the swamps against summer residents and idle strollers. Thanks to them the swamps remain the only truly virginal piece of land admitting only people who can endure a lot without losing their sense of joy.

Oh, how good I felt in this inaccessible swamp, and what eons and eons back into the history of the earth I was taken by the sight of these large birds with their long, curved bills flying across the disc of the red sun!

I was about to bend down and take one of those beautiful large eggs, when suddenly I noticed a man coming straight towards me across

the swamp. He had no gun, no dogs, not even a stick. There was no road leading anywhere here, and I knew of no one who, like me, could enjoy wandering about the swamp amid a swarm of mosquitoes. I resented him much as I'd resent catching someone studying me closely in the mirror when I'd just pulled a silly face as I combed my hair. I even walked away from the nest and did not take the egg for fear that this stranger with his inquisitive questions would kill my precious moment. I told the dogs to get up and took them to a small hump. There I sat down on a stone that was so thickly covered with yellow lichen that it felt warm. The moment I walked away from their nest the birds enlarged their circles, but I could no longer enjoy watching them. My heart stirred with alarm at the approach of the stranger. I could see him well now: he was elderly, very skinny, and he walked slowly, watching the circling of the birds keenly. I felt relieved when he changed direction and made for another hump where he sat down on a stone, and himself turned to stone. I even liked the feeling that someone like myself was sitting there and reverently imbibing the beauty of the evening. I believed that we understood each other without words, and of course there were no such words. With redoubled attention I watched the birds flying across the red disc of the sun; strangely, this disposed me to think of the earth's great age and the briefness of human history; truly, how quickly everything had passed!

The sun went down. I looked round at my comrade, but he was no longer there. The birds calmed down and evidently went to sit on their nests. Ordering the dogs to come quietly after me, I went to the nest on soundless feet, hoping to see those curious birds close to. I knew exactly where the nest was by noting the bush, and was very much surprised that they let me come so near. At last I stole up to the bush and started in amazement: there was nothing there. I touched the moss with the palm of my hand, it was still warm from the eggs that had lain there.

I had only taken a look at those eggs, but the birds, fearing a human "evil eye", hastened to hide them in a safer place.

On the edge of the swamp there lived people who were also afraid of the "evil eye". I kept seeing the disc of the red sun in the dark of the descending night, and I knew that this fear of the "evil eye" had remained with people since the time when they themselves lived like birds.

MAUVE SKY

In December, if the sky is blanketed with clouds, dusk in a coniferous forest has a very strange and quite frightening way of falling. The sky turns an even mauve and hangs lower and lower, and you have to run for safety because very soon the forest will start exercising its own, not human laws.

We hurried home along the path we'd taken in the morning and on it saw a fresh hare track. A little further on there were more tracks. This meant that the hares for whom our day is their night, and our night—their working day, were up and about. That frightening mauve sky in the dusk looked as sweet to them as a radiant dawn looks to us.

It was only four o'clock.

"What a long night this is going to be," I said.

"The longest," said Yegor. "A night for hares to walk and for man to sleep."

BLUE BUNS

A highroad with lanes for passenger cars, lorries, horsecarts and pedestrians is to run through our big forest. So far only a long corridor has been cut for it. You look along those two green walls of forest and see the sky at the end. When the forest was being felled, the big trees were taken off somewhere and the brushwood was raked together into huge heaps which were to be carted away and used for fuel in some factory or other. However, this was not managed in time, and the heaps remained for the winter along the entire length of the clearing.

In the autumn hunters complained that all the hares seemed to have vanished, and some saw a connection between their disappearance

and the felling of the forest: the noise must have frightened them off. But when the first snow fell and the hares' doings could be deciphered from their prints, the old pathfinder Rodionich came and said:

"All the blue buns are lying under those piles of firewood."

Rodionich, unlike all other hunters, never called a hare "a cross-eyed devil", but always a "blue bun". After all, why not? A hare resembles the devil as little as it resembles a blue bun, and if anyone says to me that no such things exist, I'll tell him that cross-eyed devils don't either.

The news spread like wildfire through our small town, and on Saturday hunters, lead by Rodionich, all assembled at my house.

We set out at the break of dawn without our dogs. Rodionich could chase a hare straight into the hunter's lap, so to say, more surely than any hunting dog. As soon as it was light enough to tell a fox's tracks from a hare's, we picked up a hare's and, needless to say, it brought us to a regular mountain of brushwood, as tall as our village house with the attic and all. The hare had to be there under the brushwood, and we placed ourselves in a circle, with our guns at the ready.

"Go ahead, do your stuff," we told Rodionich.

"Come out, you blue bun, come out," he shouted and poked under the brushwood with a long stick.

No hare came out. Rodionich was nonplussed. He thought for a minute, surveyed the snow with a very grave face, went round the pile and once more in a wider circle: no hare had come out.

"It's there inside," he told us confidently. "Take up your positions, men, it's there. All ready?"

"Sure," we shouted.

"Come out, blue bun, come out," Rodionich called out and thrust his stick three times so far in that the end came out on the other side of the pile and nearly knocked down one of the young hunters.

And still the hare did not come out.

Nothing so embarrassing had ever happened before to our oldest pathfinder: his face literally dropped. And the rest of us began to fuss and bustle, all making guesses and suggestions, coming and going, and smudging the hare's tracks so thoroughly that there was no chance now to try and divine what that clever "blue bun" was about.

And lo and behold! Rodionich suddenly beamed all over his face, sat down on a tree stump some distance away from the hunters, rolled a cigarette with a self-satisfied air, and gave me a wink, beckoning me.

I got the message, and trying not to attract the notice of the others walked to him.

"Look, what a trick that blue bun has played on us," he said and pointed to the very top of the snow-drifted pile.

I did not immediately recognise the twin black dots for the hare's eyes and the two other small dots for the tips of its ears. It was the hare's head sticking out of the pile turning this way and that to keep the hunters in sight.

I only had to raise my gun and the life of that clever hare would end at once. But I felt sorry for it; there was no shortage of stupid hares lying under the other piles.

Rodionich understood me perfectly. He made a small snowball and when the hunters had flocked together on the other side of the pile took aim and threw it at the hare.

Never did I imagine that our ordinary hare could look like a giant standing on a great rock, and that is what this particular hare did look like when it suddenly stood up on that pile and jumped two yards high.

You ought to have seen those hunters! That hare fell straight out of the blue. All the guns came into action at once—it was such an easy kill! But every hunter wanted to be the one to kill the hare, and so all of them fired without aiming, and the hare scuttled into the nearest bushes.

"Look at the clever thing! " Rodionich said admiringly.

"I got it! " shouted a young, hot-blooded hunter.

And suddenly, as if in answer to that statement, a fluffy little tail flickered quickly in bushes far away. A sort of farewell wave to the hunters.

THE SMART HARE

We came to this village to hunt hares. A wind started up in the evening. Our host, Agafon Timofeyich, told us not to worry, there'd be no snow. Right away it began to snow. "It's a small snowfall, over soon," he assured us. The small snowfall soon developed into a blizzard. "It will be over by midnight, the hares will come out and it will be all the easier for you to track them in the snow," Agafon Timofeyich told us. "Whatever happens is always for the best." When we awoke in the morning we couldn't see anything for the solid wall of falling snow. We called our host to answer for his weather, and he told us a story about a priest in days of yore.

The favourite horse of a country squire went and died. The priest came and told him: "Do not grieve, everything is for the best." And the next day a second horse died. And again the priest said to the squire: "Do not grieve, everything that happens in the world is always for the best." The squire bore with the priest, but when his tenth horse died he sent for the priest with a mind to give him a good beating or maybe finish him off altogether. This was during the spring flood, and on his way to the squire's estate the priest fell into a hole full of water. There was nothing for it, he had to return home, soaking wet and cold as he was. By next morning the squire's anger had passed, and when the priest came and told him how he fell into the

hole, the squire said: "Well, bless your stars that you fell into that hole yesterday." And the priest replied: "Haven't I always told you that everything that happens in the world is for the best?"

"But what has this story got to do with us?" we asked Agafon.

"Only that you're complaining about the snow. Go on your hunt and you'll see that everything is for the best."

The snowfall stopped, but the wind continued. Still, we decided to go and stretch our legs. We talked about hares as we walked and said that if we happened to rouse a hare and it was really smart it would know that in the open field its prints would be drifted over at once and the dog would lose the scent. But no hare was as smart as all that, and it would run about in the forest until we killed it. Soon we entered the forest. Our dog all but bumped into a hare, and gave it the chase. This was too good to be true: there was our hare running on the virgin snow with not another print anywhere. "Everything is for the best," we cried gaily, and scattered in a circle. But no sooner had we taken up our positions, than the baying stopped. We went to see what was up. The hare was really smart. It may have heard us talking, and dashed out of the forest into the open field where the prints were drifted over so thoroughly that we didn't find a single one, search though we did. We came back empty-handed and asked Agafon:

"Well, what was for the best in this case?"

"Why, the way I see it it's like this: the hare has escaped with its life, and by next year there'll be broods and broods of hares for you to hunt, see if I'm not right! And so everything does happen for the best."

MY HEDGEHOG

Once, walking along the bank of our stream I saw a hedgehog under a bush, it must have seen me too because it rolled up into a ball and went thump-thump-thump. I prodded it with the toe of my boot: it gave an angry snort and took a stab at my boot with its needles.

"Oh, so that's how you behave! " I said, and pushed it off into the stream. The hedgehog made a turn in the water at once and started swimming back to the bank, exactly like a little hog except that it had spikes and not bristles on its back. I picked up a small stick, rolled the hedgehog into my hat and brought it home.

We had a lot of mice and since hedgehogs were said to catch them I decided to let it live in my house and do the job.

I set down the prickly ball in the middle of the room and sat down to write, watching it out of the corner of my eye. With no sounds coming from me, the hedgehog looked about it, took a few tentative steps this way and that, and finally trotted under the bed, finding it the most suitable place, and probably fell asleep there.

When it grew dark I lit the lamp and at once the hedgehog came running out from under the bed. Hedgehogs love running about the forest glades in the light of the moon, and that's what mine started doing now, running about the room, taking the lamp for the moon. I lit my pipe and sent up a small cloud of smoke to the "moon". The picture of the forest was complete: there was the moon, the clouds, my legs like tree trunks, and now the hedgehog felt happily at home, darting between my legs, sniffing them, and scratching at the back of my heels with its needles.

Presently I went to bed and to sleep, dropping the paper I had been reading on the floor.

I'm a light sleeper. Hearing something rustling in my room, I lit my candle and was just in time to see the hedgehog slipping under my bed. The paper was now lying in the middle of the room. I left the candle burning, and lay wondering what the hedgehog could have wanted the newspaper for? Very soon it appeared from under the bed, made straight for the paper, got busy doing something with it and rustling loudly, and finally contrived to pin it on its spikes and drag the whole thing into a corner.

Of course, the hedgehog needed the paper for the nest, as it needed dry leaves in the forest, and before long it had the paper wrapped round its body, making a proper nest. This important business finished, it came out again and stopped before my bed, staring up at the candle—the moon.

I blew some smoke at it, and asked:

"What do you want now? Some water?"

I got out of bed. The hedgehog did not run away in fright.

I put a soup plate down on the floor, poured water into it from a pail, then poured it back into the pail, splashing to make it sound like a babbling brook.

"Come and drink," I said. "You see I made a moon for you, clouds too, and this here is a brook."

The hedgehog seemed to move forward a bit, I pushed the plate towards it, and we went on in this way until the water was near enough to lap.

"Drink," I said.

As it lapped up the water, I moved my hand lightly over the spikes, as though stroking its back, murmuring all the time: "Good boy, there's a good boy there! "

When it had drunk its fill, I said:

"Let's go to sleep now." And blew out the candle.

I don't know how long I slept, but the next thing I heard was the sound of small tapping feet. I lighted my candle, and what do you think I saw? The hedgehog, carrying an apple on its spiky back trotted to its nest, put the apple down, and ran back for more to the corner where a sack of apples was standing askew.

Well, that's how the hedgehog came to live with me. When I'm having tea I always pour a little milk into a saucer and break off a bit of bread for it to eat on the table with me.

A TRUE STORY

The dew had evaporated from the bushes and drops of it still glistened only under the bushes in the fold of some leaf where it was never dry. The cows had eaten their fill and now crowded together at the pool, drinking. Vanyusha, the shepherd boy, was sleeping on the hummocks, his body so strangely arched that you wondered how it could have happened. He must have put his head on a hummock and flattened it while he slept, so that now his head hung low at one end and his legs at the other, with his middle, tummy up, arching.

I've known him for a long time: carroty hair, large freckles all over his face, and very clear, shiny eyes, like a well-licked lollipop. I have long admitted him into Berendei's kingdom and if I see him I never walk past. I was in luck that day, I wanted to stay with him for a little, and shook him awake. He opened one eye, pulled out an almost full bottle, held it out to me, and went back to sleep. I began to shake him properly and laugh.

"Drink," he told me. "I had plenty last night, I brought this along for you."

When he was quite awake and had taken his morning-after drink, I took the last issue of *Hunter* out of my bag and gave it to him.

"Read this, Vanya. I wrote it."

He got down to reading. And I lit a cigarette and started writing in my note-book. I would be at it for fifteen minutes exactly, that's how

long it took me to smoke a cigarette. I had timed it. Vanya was still reading when I finished, and I asked:

"Show me where you are now."

He showed me: in fifteen minutes he had read two and a half lines, and there were three hundred in all.

"Give me the magazine. I've got to go, it's not worth reading," I told him.

He returned the magazine to me readily, and said:

"True, it's not worth reading."

I was amazed. I had never met such frank and good-natured readers yet, even among the peasants. It hurt a bit, but still I liked his frankness more than I minded it.

He yawned and said:

"Maybe if you'd written what's true, but I bet you made it all up, didn't you?"

"Not all of it," I replied. "Some."

"Now if I were to write it! "

"With everything the way it really is?"

"Everything. I'd take a pen and write about the night, how night passes in the swamp."

"And how does it pass?" I asked.

"Like this. Night. There's a great big bush near the pool. I'm sitting under that bush, and the ducklings go whiss-whiss-whiss."

He stopped. I thought he was looking for words or images, but very matter-of-factly he took out his reed and started drilling a seventh hole in it.

"Well, what happened next?" I asked him.

"You were going to describe the whole night."

"I did, and it's all true. There's a great big bush. I'm sitting under that bush and the ducklings go whiss-whiss-whiss all night long."

"It's much too short."

"Too short? Going whiss-whiss-whiss all night long, you call that too short?"

I thought it over and said:

"It's really good."

"Sure it is," he replied, and started playing on his reed.

A LONE CRANE

In the mornings a lone crane came to the water-meadow and did not call, only whistled. The villagers noticed him and talked about him every time he came.

Why did he whistle?

Some said it was because he was ill. Others said because he was old. Still others thought that his mate had been killed during their flight. This last guess would have fitted the case perfectly, except that it prompted another question: why didn't he find himself another mate? And then once again everyone said that he was too old to fight for a mate.

Listening to all this talk, I asked:

"What about the autumn when there'll be plenty of young females, will he, an old crane, be allowed by their crane laws to choose a young wife for himself?"

Fyodor Ivanovich, my hunter-friend who knew all about cranes, replied:

"He'll take a young one."

His wife said grumpily:

"A young one, a young one, what good will come of it, a young wife with that old whistler."

"Ah well, with a young wife he'll stop whistling, with a young wife even an old chap will start trumpeting."

Everyone laughed. Fyodor's wife got angry, and called him a shameless old goat in front of everyone. She was a very jealous woman.

AN OLD CRONE'S HEAVEN

An old woman was walking along the road. She was unwell, and suddenly had a dizzy spell.

"There's nothing for it, I s'pose," she said. "My hour has come to die."

She took a look about her to see where it would be nicest to lie down and die.

"Can't live two life spans anyway, must clear the way for the young."

And she saw a nice clean glade, thickly carpeted with grass. A clean white path with the prints of bare human feet on it ran across this glade. And in the middle of it a stack of firewood had been left by someone ages ago; it had fallen apart, grown over with moss and sprouted tall grass on top. The old woman liked this soft bed very much.

"Can't live two life spans anyway," she repeated. She lay down in the grass and stuck her feet out, thinking that people walking past would notice them, and bury her.

Late that evening we were returning home along that path, and suddenly saw a pair of legs sticking out, and sparrows chirping on top of the old stack. It's wonderful sometimes in the crimson glow of the setting sun to see a lot of sparrows flocking together and talking, talking, each one rejoicing that he is alive and telling all the others about it.

And suddenly all the sparrows started off and away. And in their place an old woman's head poked out of the grass. We quickly started a fire, gave the old woman some hot tea, fussed over her. she cheered up and told us how she had been going to die on that old stack.

"Well then, my dear hunters," she said. "I felt dizzy and said to myself: can't live two life spans anyway, must give way to the young. And so I lay down on that stack, on the soft moss, among the grass, and it was so nice, like in heaven! And here I thought that everything was over for me down on earth. And then the birds came, heavenly birds I thought they were, such pretty little birds, chirping so happily. I have never seen any like them on earth. And I understood what they were talking about too—one would say: I'm alive! And another would reply: me, too! And they kept telling each other I'm alive, alive, alive! They were only birds, I thought, but here, in heaven, they understood

how good it was to be alive, and we people on earth, are forever grumbling, forever finding something wrong.

"And then one of the birdies, a pert little rock, sat on a twig right close to my mouth, and chirped: 'Take that! ' and aimed a dropping right into my open mouth! I knew then that I was on earth, not in heaven.'

We burst out laughing, and I asked:

"Did you think that in heaven birds don't do it?"

"No, my dears, what I told you all this for is that down on earth people should keep their mouths shut."

GRANDFATHER'S FELT BOOT

I remember it very well—old Mikhei had been wearing his felt boots for ten years, and I don't know how many years he had worn them before then. He'd look at his boots and say:

"They want re-soling, they've worn through again."

He would go to the market, buy a piece of felt, cut out a pair of soles, and his boots would be as good as new again.

This went on for so many years that I began to think that everything came to an end in the world, everything died and only old Mikhei's felt boots would last forever.

He was never ill, and now he complained of pain in his legs, the pain got so bad that he even called in the doctor.

"It's because of the cold water," the doctor told him. "You must give up fishing."

"But I live only by fishing! " old Mikhei protested. "I can't not get my feet wet."

"Wear your felt boots then," the doctor advised him.

He followed the doctor's advice, and his legs stopped aching. Only after this he never went into the water without his boots, and the pebbles on the bottom were a terror for the felt soles, of course. Not only the soles, but even higher up on the instep some cracks appeared.

Must be true that everything came to an end, I was thinking. Even old Mikhei's boots couldn't last forever.

And people started telling him:

"It's time you gave those boots a rest, time you gave them to the crows for a nest."

Nothing doing! To keep the snow out of the cracks, he dipped his boots in water and then put them out in the cold, to freeze, repeating the operation twice. You can't imagine how warm they became; I myself wore them when I had to walk across a swamp that didn't freeze over, and never felt a thing!

And once again I went back to thinking that his felt boots would never come to an end.

But then it so happened that old Mikhei fell ill. When he needed to go outside he stuck his legs into his felt boots, standing in the covered porch, but when he returned he forgot to take them off there and climbed on to the hot stove-bed with them on.

Never mind, of course, that the ice on them melted and dripped into a pail of milk. The terrible thing was that this time those immortal boots were done for.

It could not be otherwise. If you fill a flask with water and freeze it, the ice cracks the flask open. Similarly, the ice filling the felt caused it to burst and disintegrate.

As soon as old Mikhei was up and about he tried freezing his boots again and even wore them for a little, but then came spring, the ice on them melted and they went to pieces.

"I guess it's true that it's time they took a rest in crows' nests," he said angrily, and flung them into the thistles where at the moment I was catching goldfinches and other little birds.

"Why let only the crows use your boots?" I asked. "In the spring all the birds want a bit of wool, a feather, or some straw to build their nests."

He stopped in the act of flinging the second boot, and said:

"That's true, all the birds need some wool for their nests, wool's a useful thing, everyone needs it—field mice, squirrels, all those little creatures."

And here he remembered our hunter asking him to let him have his felt boots for wads, when he was ready to throw them away. Remembering this, old Mikhei asked me to take the second boot to this hunter.

The time of nest-building was nigh. All kinds of little birds came flying down to the river,

and as they pecked at the thistles they noticed the felt boot lying there. Every little bird noticed it, and now, from morning till night, they pecked and pecked at it, and within a week not a shred was left. They had lined their nests with the wool, settled in, and as they hatched the eggs their mates sang songs.

Birds were hatched in the felt boot's warmth, they were fledged and when the cold weather came they flew off in great flocks to warm climes. Next spring they would find the remains of old Mikhei's felt boot. The nests built on the bushes would not go to waste either: they'd fall on the ground, the field mice would find them and carry the bits of wool to their underground nests.

I've done a lot of wandering about the forest in my life, and every time I found a bird's nest lined with felt, I said to myself:

"Everything comes to an end in this world, everything dies, and only old Mikhei's felt boots will last forever."

THE CHIEF JUDGE

I love dogs! First of all, of course, I love to hunt and I keep dogs for hunting, but also—and perhaps this I like even more than hunting—I like talking to dogs, playing with them, taking my mind off harsher things, as it were... But what I don't like is putting my dogs up for an exhibition. Why? I'll tell you presently...

Once a hunting dogs' exhibition was scheduled, and they called me from the Hunters' Society telling me it was compulsory on the members to exhibit their dogs.

Well, since it was compulsory, I took my Nora to the exhibition.

Nora was a spaniel, a smallish dog on short legs, with a cropped tail and ears longer than a setter's. Whenever she bent her head down, her ears swept over the ground. When we fed her, we tied her ears in the back with a ring made of an old stocking so they wouldn't droop into the bowl. Nora's coat was very much like a setter's—thick and wavy, black with white, and her legs had white stockings. We use spaniels only in duck-shooting—to flush up the birds and retrieve them from the reeds.

This dog was endearing and funny at once in her air of importance: she was so small, yet she had a setter's sense of dignity. Of human qualities, she had a wonderful memory. They say in London spaniels are used as guide dogs, for the blind.

Well, so I brought my Nora to the exhibition. Sitting at a table and registering the dogs was the most famous judge of hunting dogs in the country.

"A.A.," I addressed him, "I don't want to exhibit Nora. Please, just register her, and let us go home. Could you do that?"

"But why?" he asked. "Are you afraid she'll catch distemper? You needn't worry on that account. We took all the necessary precautions."

"I'm not afraid of distemper," I said, "I am really ashamed to say what I'm afraid of—an evil eye."

He leant back, gave me that understanding look that Russian people reserve for a person when they realise he is pulling their leg, and burst out laughing, just managing to bring out through his guffaws.

"These hunting writers will be the death of me! "

Having done laughing, he patted me on the shoulder as one pats a horse—in a loving, friendly manner, and said, pointing at my little spaniel:

"A gold medal! I stake my reputation on it. There's not another bitch to equal her in the city. A gold medal is as good as yours. I'm saying this as chief judge."

Now tell me, how is one to rid oneself of fixed conception? There is not a grain of gold in those gold medals they give dogs—it is merely a sheet of paper with words written on it. But the mere mention of "gold" acted on me as some insidious kind of poison. I felt immediately tempted. I wanted a gold medal more than anything in the world. But I knew Nora had a secret blemish, so I said:

"They won't give Nora any gold medal: she has a bulldog's jaw."

A.A. bent down, opened her mouth competently and darkened—Nora's lower jaw protruded forward in front of the upper set of teeth.

"Yes, you're right," he said.

"Let us be then. What's the point of exhib-

iting a dog with a blemish?"

He pondered a minute, his face clouded. Then it was as if lightning streaked across darkness, and his clean wholesome face cleared up like nature after a thunderstorm.

"And why shouldn't you exhibit her?" he asked. "I am not going to judge the spaniels today, and the other judges may just miss it."

I gazed at him in great amazement and confusion.

I had known this man for thirty years. He lived in a suburb. He had a wonderful wife he was devoted to and who never left his side, several first-rate dogs, a guitar and a set of paints. He only painted dogs and hunting scenes and sold his pictures to hunting goods shops. What incentive could this man of crystal-clear integrity have to connive at deception in dog judging? Moreover, whenever I wrote a hunting story, weaving my way between truth and invention, I always steered my course by A.A. as a beacon light. And now my beacon light was obviously guiding me to underwater rocks.

Seeing my confusion, he winked and said:

"They may very well miss the blemish. She is such a charming dog, with such splendid points—they may simply not think of a minor thing like this. You'll get your medal all right. Go on, show her."

And I went. We walked along a broad alleyway between dogs of different breeds. There was a funny long bandy-legged dachshund, a huge borzoi hound, wearing a velvet collar

of blue with gold braid, its silky white coat groomed to perfection, there was a near-naked black pointer taut as a watch-spring, a huge ginger Irish setter and a Laverack setter bitch, as graceful as a ballerina, and there were many poodles—sheared to resemble lions or ladies with crinolines.

A crowd had gathered near a ferocious South-Russian sheep-dog, its eyes concealed behind its shaggy white fur. There was an argument in progress.

"Why do you think its eyes are hidden like that?"

This is a fascinating question which has not received an answer in dog books to this day, and so they made guesses, each relying on his own human mentality:

"I think," one man said, "that these bushes over the eyes serve the same function as any bush: a passer-by thinks it's a bush, but underneath there's an eye that watches his every movement. It's a watch dog, mind you!"

So they talked, exchanging not book knowledge but knowledge of themselves.

Well, Nora and I finally reached our own ring. The spaniels and their masters were already gathered there, waiting for the judges to come. I looked at my rivals and was overjoyed to see that not one dog was a patch on my Nora. No matter what you say, each of us is a sportsman at heart and yearns to win top honours in at least one kind of contest. I was very much aware of this and kept recalling the judge's

words: "The gold medal is as good as yours! "

The judges came: two huge fellows and a runt of a man—all complete strangers. We were told to walk in a file round and round the ring, each keeping his dog on a leash by his left leg. And as soon as they laid eyes on Nora, all the three judges were spellbound.

Rejoice, all hunters, rejoice, all dog-lovers, rejoice all those marvellous people who have managed to preseve within themselves the golden time of childhood. I had been a morose egotist, who had been hiding Nora's beauty from other people's eyes, who had scorned exhibitions! Just look at him, the man with a greying beard, walking round and round the ring, leading a small dog and unable to conceal his delight in being on top.

The judges had eyes only for Nora; they'd run ahead and look at her from up front, they'd lag behind and look at her hindquarters; one of the two giants even lay down on the ground to see better.

But the best thing about that overwhelming feeling of happiness was that I had clean forgotten about the bulldog's jaw; it was as if it had never been, or as if it followed naturally from that march of glory that in its acclamation of Nora's beauty, the world had forgiven her that small defect.

All of a sudden the judges stopped looking at my Nora and started writing in their journals.

They gathered into a bunch, and the little judge gave me a wave to indicate that I might

leave the ring. I had just a few steps to make to mingle with the masses of people sauntering down the broad alleyway. Another two or three seconds—and the crowd would have swallowed me, and I would have fled from judgement like a fish diving into deep waters. But somebody told me: "They're calling you." I glanced over my shoulder and saw that all the three judges were waving to me, calling me back.

No! No! As God is my witness, I still bless that glorious path to fame, and I believe that it may lead a blameless person to the stars themselves. It was my own fault that I had succumbed to temptation, that I suffered that fall.

The judges said to me:

"We must have a look at her teeth..."

And as soon as they had a look...

It is like picking a question card from an examiner's table and drawing a total blank; you may live to a hundred years, and you will still have nightmares about that accursed card. But whose fault was it that you had not learnt the things you were supposed to? Of course I shifted all my chagrin onto A.A.—why had he dragged me into this ignominious business?

I searched long for him in the tumult of the exhibition. Radiant with health and good humour, ready to hug and congratulate me, he asked:

"Did they miss it?"

"They almost did," I said, "but in the end..."

"They discovered it?" he exclaimed joyously. "Did they really?"

"You let me make a fool of myself..."

"Now, now," he said soothingly, patting me on the nape of my neck, "it's nothing really. But just think how smart our judges are! What does it matter that you didn't get a medal? They are fine judges, the very best, aren't they?"

And it was only then that I understood why our chief dog judge had winked at me. He had been making a pact with me to test the junior judges; and when it transpired that they were fine judges, what did a lost medal matter?

DRIPPING FOREST

There was a time when we, inquisitive youngsters, broke our toys up, things we had been given for presents and even watches, to find out what was inside. In the old days that was exactly how they taught us in school to treat nature. We'd be taken out into a field where we'd pick a flower each and start ripping off the petals to count how many petals there were, how many stamens, pistils, and so on. Actually it was the same with the flowers as with the toys: the thing was broken up, plucked, the image shattered and nothing left.

Nowadays when studying nature we take care not to destroy the image of a flower, an aminal or stone, and, what is more, try to enrich it with our own human images.

I learnt to do this by myself, making notes as I went along. That is how I wrote this book, an experiment of poetically studying nature taken in unity with man living in it and being part of it.

THE SPRING OF LIGHT

For us, phenologists, who observe the changes in natural phenomena day after day, spring begins with more light, a time when it is said that the bear is turning on to his other side in his den; that is when the sun turns to summer, and though the winter promises more frost, the Gipsy sells his sheepskin.

January, February, and the beginning of March —that is the spring of light. The ice breaking up in the sky is best seen in a large town in the gaps between tall buildings. In town, at this time of year, I work like mad, hoarding every ruble I earn like a miser, until at last, after quarrelling my fill with everybody over money, I am free to leave and go where I am not likely to earn anything, and that's when I feel really happy. Indeed, lucky is the man who can see the beginning of the spring of light in town and then go out into the country to welcome the spring of waters, grasses, forest, and maybe his own spring too.

When, after a snowy winter, the spring of light comes into its own, everyone living close to nature worries what sort of spring it is going to be, and every time it turns out to be different from the year before, and no two springs are ever exactly alike.

This year, the spring of light had outstayed its time, the snow dazzled the eyes almost unbearably, and everywhere people were saying:

"It will be over before you know it! "

People setting out on a long journey in sledges worried that they would have to ditch the sledge somewhere and trudge back, leading the horse by the bridle.

A new spring is never like the old one, and that's why it's so good to be alive and look forward eagerly to what the year will bring.

THE BEGINNING OF THE SPRING OF LIGHT

In the morning it was 20° C below zero, but in the middle of the day melting snow dripped from the roofs. Today, the whole day from morning to night was radiant and sparkling like crystal. The firs, loaded with snow, may have been made of alabaster, changing colour all day from rose to pale blue. A wedge of moon remained hanging in the sky for a long time while down below, along the horizon, shades of colour were being matched.

On this first day of the spring of light everything was wonderful, and we spent it hunting hare. In spite of the severe frost, the hares bedded down in the fields, in shrubs, and near the edge of the forest, and not in the swamps where they were supposed to bed down in the cold.

A RUBY EYE

A frosty silence. Dusk falling. Darkness gathers in the undergrowth of the still bare

forest, as if it were the forest itself collecting its thoughts for the night. The sun pierces the dark of the bushes with a ruby eye, and through the bushes it looks no bigger than a human eye.

THE FIRST CUMULUS CLOUDS

A huge snowdrift was formed in front of our house and it gleamed in the sun like the unruffled breast of a great white swan. It took no little effort to push open the front door, piled up with the night's snow, and then I had to dig a trench, shovelling the light new snow right and left, and then cutting through the caked, heavy layers underneath.

I had no pity to spare the snowdrift, for high up in the sky there sailed a large, warm-looking cloud, unlike any you see in winter, and it, too, was like the unruffled breast of a great white swan. Here and there, together with spring, on earth and in the sky, my immaculate vision appears before me again, and now I welcome it without my old frenzy of excitement and see it go without despair: like spring, it comes and goes, and while I live it will always return. So why bemoan it? That would be childish, and I am the father and master of all my visions.

It's no joke, being fifty. Remember what the Good Book says? "Till your land for six years, and in the seventh let it rest and recover. After seven times seven it will be your fiftieth year,

then take your trumpet and blow, for this is your jubilee! "

"Come on, boys, up you get," I shouted to my sons. "Come and help me, it's going to be my jubilee soon."

They are called Lyova and Petya, and both are crazy about hunting in the forest. I cultivated this passion in them sensibly; my children will never kill just for the sake of a good shot, they shoot only what we want for food or what can be a contribution to the museum. During the closed season, from New Year till early spring, they go to the dances in town, getting home late to our village. These outings of theirs they also call "going hunting". Fluff appeared rather early on Lyova's upper lip, he shaved it on the quiet with my razor, and now the moustache is well on its way. My younger boy's face is still quite hairless.

After Forty Saints' Day, when the rooks, the larks and other small birds come back, the boys forget all about the dances in town and get busy with their preparations for blackcock mating time. And when the shooting season begins and they've had a good day's hunting, they recall their dancing nights with a shrug of their shoulders.

"Can you feel what a day this is, boys?" I asked them. "The spring of light is in full swing, we'll have the water flooding the cellar if we don't look snappy."

We did a good job of work, and it left us bubbling over with moral satisfaction.

I stood there leaning on my shovel, thrust into the snow, my heart overflowing with love, but for whom I could not clearly tell.

Two ravens were turning somersaults above the mauve forest.

Why, that's whom I loved—those birds. On a dread winter day, when the frost is so fierce that the sun seems crucified on pillars of light, when everything is buried under snow, when man and beast have gone into hiding and birds fall dead in flight, and I'm the only living soul there, driving home with no certainty that I shall ever get there, this black raven flies high over the white expanse, his frost-bitten wing creaking.

This was their mating time. The bird below knocks down the one above and climbs higher, then the other does the same, and the performance is repeated as they fly higher and higher, suddenly swooping down with sharp cries only to soar up once more.

Ravens turning somersaults—what a wonderful sight! A melody sounds in my heart, I have no words for it, but it's all about this blue sky and the warm cloud floating over the radiant spring expanse once again, like a great white swan, holding its unruffled breast proudly high.

SPRING FROST

Last night a sudden northern snowstorm and frost made a mess of the sun's work! Even the violets were covered with crystals of ice and

snapped at the touch, and the sun itself seemed ashamed to rise in disgrace like that.

It was not easy to put matters right, but in spring the sun cannot be disgraced for long, and it was not long after seven when water-striders started hopping about the puddle in the road.

BLUE SHADOWS

Silence, frosty and radiant, was restored. Yesterday's dry snow lay on the ice crust like sparkling powder. The ice crust did not break underfoot, and out in the open field, in the sun, it was even stronger than in the shade. Every little shrub, every blade of grass peered into the ice mirror and saw its beautiful blue reflection.

SLOW SPRING

There was no frost last night. The weather today is bleak, but not warm. A greyish day. Still, spring is approaching, of course. Frogs are already poking their heads out from the not quite melted pond and croaking under their breath, but since they do it all together it sounds like hundreds of carts rumbling along the highroad. Ploughing is going on apace. The last patches of snow are disappearing. But no steaming warmth rises from the ground, and water does not look at all inviting. True, it's early spring, but to us it seems to be making slow progress. The scene is cheerless because after the

snowless winter and only the recent fall, the prematurely denuded ground is too cold for this time of year. The hazelnut bushes are in flower, but even when a bird touches a blossom no pollen is shed. The dead leaves emerging from under the snow are grey and hard-packed.

Yesterday a woodcock stuck his nose into last year's leaves to get a worm from under it, but we happened along and he had to take off with the old aspen leaves stuck to his bill. I shot him, and we counted the leaves—there were ten!

THE ROAD AT THE END OF MARCH

In the daytime all the spring birds flock to the road to feed; and at night the beasts also go their way along this road so as not to sink to their ears in the porous snow. For a long time yet people will drive in sleighs over this road, reddish-brown from horse dung which keeps the ice from melting.

Little by little it becomes an obstruction for the numerous brooks running toward it. A man was driving along with his little boy and saw a whole lake formed on one side of the road. The water was pressing hard against the road that dammed its way, and when more brooks poured in, the dam broke and a noisy stream of water barred the way to these travellers.

LAND!

There had been no frost for three days and

the mist was invisibly undermining the snow.

"Come outside, Daddy," Petya said to me. "Look and listen how nicely the buntings are singing."

I went out and listened. It was really very nice: the singing and the gentle little breeze. The road looked reddish-brown all the way, and humpbacked.

It was as though fleet-footed spring had been brought to a breathless stop to pause in meditation... Cocks were crowing all over the place. And the blue outline of the forest began to emerge from the haze.

Petya peered into the thinning mist and noticing some dark object on the snow-clad field cried:

"It's bare ground! "

He ran into the house and shouted to his brother:

"Lyova, come quick and look! "

Their mother came out too and shading her eyes with a hand asked:

"What is it you saw?"

Petya pointed at the snowy distance and like Columbus cried:

"Land, I see land! "

BLACKCOCK HUNTING

During the night there was a great outcropping of stars in the sky, it turned cold in my room, and I went outside to see what it was

like. My neighbour, an old peasant, happened to come out at the same time.

"Freezing, eh?" I said.

He did not answer at once, he looked about him at the snow and up at the starlit sky, kicked at the ground with his foot and said:

"Grandson Frost has come to fetch his grandfather."

I walked over the snow and my feet did not sink in.

"A good grandson that," I said, and went indoors to wake up my boys.

I told them that this might well be the last ice crust that year and that we absolutely must go to Vorogosh to see if the mating of the blackcock had begun. Even if we did not hear their singing we'd see the traces of their swishing wings on the snow.

"You're a real expert, Dad," Lyova said happily and started shaking Petya.

The ground was frozen hard and dusted with snow. The going was easy and delightful. The woods and marshes for versts and versts around had been tramped by us, we'd run with our hounds here countless times, and we had our own name for every islet, hollow and hillock: we had our "Sunny Glade" with three tall firs under which hares always passed, we had a dry spot between two large swamps called "Breathing Spell", we had our "Golden Meadow", and some eight versts from home, in the middle of all but impassable bog and visible from afar, rose a thickly wooded little hill

which the local people simply called the "Tuft" and we named the "Alaun Height". We quickly ran the eight versts over the powdered ice crust to this "Tuft" and here, standing on this high spot, we felt the first touch of the southern wind on our faces. I remembered then that everyone had been saying that spring would be over before it began, and wondered how we would get back across the bog if the day was sunny with a southern wind.

While waiting for daybreak we stood leaning against the trees and listened. It's really true that you can tramp the woods all your life, learn everything, study everything, and yet something will happen which will baffle you completely. We heard a crashing noise in the bog at our feet, we heard the ice broken like glass and the sounds of the falling bits. The monster which was crashing through the ice was advancing on us very swiftly, and the three of us with bated breath and our guns cocked waited for it in the dark. But just before it reached our island, it turned off into the swamp; the crashing stopped for a moment at the spot we call "Breathing Spell", only to be resumed, and we thought we'd never hear the end of it. And then, from where the first red glow of dawn appeared in the sky, Petya and then Lyova heard the sound we were longing to hear. It must have been very far away, I didn't hear it, there was a ringing in my ears and I imagined it was still that elk smashing and smashing the glass on the swamp. Since the boys heard the

blackcock first, it was their privilege to go leaping down the icy slope and then, at the risk of frightening off the bird, across the glassy swamp.

And I was content with the beautiful glow in the sky and the gentle southern breeze as I stood on the hillock and gazed down at the swamp sparsely wooded with grey pines.

How long did I stand like that? Eons passed in that red glow, and suddenly I heard a shot. I would rather it was their shot and not mine, for their success gladdens me more than my own. But I had to do a bit of leaping too; at the third leap I heard that peculiar, indescribable whirr of great wings, swung round quickly, saw the big, black shape between the tree-tops against the red sky, and fired point-blank. The other blackcock, the one I had been leaping towards, got away. Never mind, one was enough for me. The blackcock fell on a huge ant-hill under the pines, and I sat right on this ant-hill which had not yet come to life, with my face to the dawn.

The boys fired another shot, but I hardly noticed it because my attention was wholly captivated by a world of puzzles revealed to me by the rising sun. I strained to solve these puzzles. Water was trickling along a tiny channel in a puddle under the ice. How come? I thought that puzzle out and solved it:when the snow had just begun to melt a fieldmouse, running past, stamped down the flaccid snow; after that came a frost and another thaw, the puddle froze over once again but not to the bottom of the tiny groove, and the water used it for a passage.

I may have fallen asleep, I do not know, because when I sleep out in the open I do not break off my thoughts or feelings, I simply lose count of time, that's all. I was startled awake by a swishing noise: a branch that had been weighted down by snow and frozen to the very puddle where the water rang along the field-mouse's passage, suddenly rebounded and there it stood before me—a slender, young tree. I jumped to my feet and what I saw all round my hillock was water, blue water!

The thought that we were marooned on this island never crossed my mind, it didn't matter, we'd get home somehow. The joy of seeing the spring of light and water once again was overwhelming, and at once I remembered these words from the Good Book: "Till your land for six years, and in the seventh year let it rest, and when you have done this seven times seven pick up your trumpet and blow, for that will be your jubilee."

I took the barrel off my gun and blew down it with all my might. My alarmed children came running. I told them to take the barrels off their guns too and blow:

"Blow your trumpets, children, for this is my jubilee! "

A SPRING BROOK

Out on a shoot, I listened to the water. It rolled noiselessly along a hollow in the meadow,

and only when two streamlets collided there was a splash. As I listened and waited for the next splash I asked myself what caused it? Could it be that higher upstream the snow caved in from time to time and this event in the life of the water was transmitted to it through the collision occurring here, or perhaps... It might be anything. You see, when you try to fathom the whys and wherefors of one spring brook you discover that you can really understand it only if you have first understood the life of the Universe through the medium of your own experiences and emotions.

THE FIRST BROOKS

I heard a bird taking wing with a faint dove-like gurgle, and rushed to my dog to see if the woodcock had really come. But there was my Kenta running about quite unexcitedly. I went back to feast my eyes on the spring flood and on the way again heard that dove-like gurgling sound. And again and again.

It dawned on me at last that I should stop moving when I heard that sound. I stood still, little by little the sound became continuous and I realised that it was the tiniest of brooks babbling under the snow somewhere. I liked it so much that as I walked along I listened attentively to the babbling of other brooks and to my amazement was able to distinguish their different natures from the sound.

THE COMING OF THE FINCHES

It is between the coming of the finches and the coming of the cuckoo that our spring is at its loveliest with a beauty as refined and complex as the fanciful intertwining of a birch tree's still bare branches. In this space of time the snow melts, the streams of water race away, the ground becomes covered with new grass and the first flowers which we hold so dear, the buds on the poplars burst, the fragrant and sticky little leaves open out, and the cuckoo arrives. It is then, after all the loveliest part is over, that everyone says: "Spring has come! How lovely! "

But for us, hunters, spring ends with the coming of the cuckoo. It's no longer spring once all the birds have gone to brood in their nests.

With the coming of the cuckoo the woods become run over by people. A shot fired by some idler jars so terribly on my nerves that I instantly forget what I had been thinking about and run as far away as possible so I won't have to hear more shots. Or, say, I'd be going somewhere in the early morning and suddenly I'd see footprints on the dewy grass in front of me, meaning that some other person was walking ahead of me. I'd turn the other way at once, changing all my plans simply because I'd seen someone's footprints on the grass. Or sometimes I'd wander into the depths of the forest and, sitting down on a stump to rest, would say to myself: "This forest is really so vast that

there surely must be a spot, if only a yard square, on which no mortal has ever set foot, and it's very likely that no one has sat on this stump before me..." and there, near the stump, my eyes would happen upon the shell of an egg.

I have often heard it said that a mushroom, on which the eyes of a man has fallen, stops growing. I checked this many times and found that the mushroom went on growing. I also heard that birds carry their eggs away to another place, if they have been noticed by someone, and checked: birds are naively trustful. After the arrival of the finches and before the snow in the forest has begun to melt I love going up the hill and there wait for something. It's rarely perfect—it's either too cold, or too rainy, or too windy. But at long last comes an evening when the early willow unfolds, when there's a smell of new green grass in the air, and when the primroses appear. Then I look back, remembering how many evenings I had waited, and how much had to be lived through before this wonder could come to pass. I'd feel as if I had taken part in creating it together with the sun, the wind and the clouds, and I'd be rewarded with the knowledge that my waiting had not been in vain.

FROST IN MAY

Everything said that there would be a hard frost that night. A little after midnight, with

the moon shining, I went to the oak grove, where there are many little birds and first flowers. In my mind I call this grove a land of little birds and mauve flowers.

Very soon a glow appeared in the west and the light moved east as though the light of dawn, invisible behind the horizon, were drawing the western glow towards it. I was walking at a very brisk step and felt so warm that I did not even notice that the frost had struck the grass and the flowers. When the pre-dawn hour passed and the frost developed to its full strength, I picked one of the little mauve flowers meaning to warm it in my hands, but it was brittle and broke at the touch.

* * *

A yellow butterfly sits on a red bilberry shrub with its wings folded into a single leaf; it won't and can't fly away until the sun has warmed it, and it doesn't even attempt to run for its life from my reaching fingers.

NATURAL BAROMETERS

It was rainy one day and sunny the next, and that's how it went on. I got my feet wet in the stream taking photographs and, from force of winter habit, wanted to sit on an ant-hill, but then I saw that the ants had crawled out and

crowded close together in a solid, motionless mass as if they were waiting for something, or it may be that they were coming to before they started work.

A few days ago it was as warm as this before the frost struck, and we wondered why there were no ants and why the sap did not rise in the birches. When the temperature dropped to $-18^{\circ}C$ that night we did not wonder any more: the birches and the ants knew that a frost was coming, they knew it from the icy ground.

The ground is thawing now and the sap has risen in the birches.

A TARDY BROOK

It's warm in the forest. The grass between the grey bushes looks such a bright green! What pretty little paths! What a beautiful, dreamy silence! The cuckoo began to give voice on the first of May and now it has become quite bold. The black-grouse mutters at sunset as well. The stars have burst into light in the transparent clouds. The trunks of the birches still glimmer whitely in the dusk. Mushrooms have appeared. The aspens have flung out their grey, worm-like catkins. A tardy brook is hurrying across the green grass, and from a broken birch twig drops of sap fall into the water.

THE SPRING OF WATER

The snow is still deep but so flaccid that even a hare's legs sink right in and it scrapes the snow with its belly.

From the road the birds fly to feed in the fields where the ground shows black.

In the rain all the birches weep tears of joy, the glistening drops fall on the snow and that is what makes it so porous.

The last bits of ice on the road crackle underfoot. And the ice bed along which the spring torrent had rushed has also melted and turned to mud, and on it a hare has left its prints as it ran across in the night.

THE BROOK AND THE PATH

The snow has melted on the path running along the forest, and beside it babbles a brook, and the two run on together, on and on in this sunlit open space, while on the other side of the brook, on the northern slope amid the conifers, the snow lies solid and untouched as if this were the Siberian taiga.

DRIPPING SNOW

It was sunny and windy. There was a spring-day light. The tomtits and crossbills were singing their mating songs. The crust of ice broke

under my skis and the pieces flew, tinkling like smashed glass. In the light of the sun the grove of young birches looked pink against the dark forest. On a tin roof the sunray formed something like a glacier from which water came streaming down, while the glacier itself kept shrinking. The strip of sun-heated iron between the glacier and the edge of the roof became wider and wider. The tiny stream, falling on to an icicle in the shade where it was cold, froze, and the icicle grew thicker at the top. When the sun came round the roof and glanced at the icicle, the frost was gone, and the water streaming from the glacier came running down the icicle and falling in golden drops, and from every roof in town golden drops went falling down all day.

In the shade it grew cold long before dusk, and although the glacier on the roof continued to shrink and the water to run down the icicle, some of the drops froze at the tip, which was already in the shade, and the icicle grew in length. And the next day it was sunny again, and again the glacier shrank, and again the icicle grew in thickness in the morning and in length in the evening, thicker and longer every day.

A WARM DOWNPOUR

The buds on the lime tree in front of my window were large and green, and from each bud hung a drop of water as large as the bud it-

self. The drop rolled down the thin twig, merged with the drop on another bud and fell down to the ground. And higher up, a whole invisible river streamed along the rough bark of a large branch, spreading to the lesser twigs and replacing the fallen drops. And so the whole tree was covered with drops, and the whole tree was dripping water.

The downpour went on for thirty-six hours with never a break. The highway became impassable, as during the spring flood. I took a picture of it and also of a young pine covered with large raindrops. I trained my camera on it in such a way that the top branches, from which the drops had rolled off, appeared against the sky, and the lower branches, hung with large drops, had the dark forest for a backcloth for the drops to shine against.

THE FIRST SONG OF WATER

In the evening we went out to see if the hazel-grouse would respond to our decoy whistle. In the spring we don't shoot them, we simply amuse ourselves watching them come running along the hard snow, stopping, listening, and sometimes coming so close that you could grab one with your hand.

When we were ready to return home we found the going much harder: a light evening frost had crusted the snow, but our feet sank in and had to be pulled out with an effort. The

orange sunset had a hard, glassy glow, and the pools in the swamp were ablaze with a red light.

We very much wanted to find out if what we were hearing were the blackcock muttering their mating songs. And so all the three of us crowded on top of a large hummock and listened.

I puffed at my pipe, and the wavering smoke told us that there was a faint wind from the north. We listened hard to hear what the wind would bring us, and suddenly understood everything: it was the water purling down below, very near, splashing as it came up against the little bridge, and it sounded exactly like the singing of a blackcock.

THE SPRING OF WATER BEGINS

I cannot say that I had moved so far away that city noises did not reach me, I still heard everything—the whistles of the electric locomotive, and all kinds of knocking and thudding, but it did not matter because the forest has a silence all its own which absorbed my attention so entirely that I was quite deaf to the urban din.

I did not notice the rain as I walked along and only realised that it was raining when I came to a grove of young birches and noticed that it had turned slightly pink from its first encounter with the heavenly water and was hung with large grey raindrops, as big as pussy-willows.

I came to the Black Bridge and saw that the brook was still running deep down in the snow-

drifts and only here and there I could see funnels filled with water.

And so today I witnessed the very beginning of the spring of water.

THE ROAD

The road, frozen, toil-worn, trampled by countless hoofs and sleigh runners, and filthy with horse dung, ran straight into a clear sea of water and from there reappeared in the transparent sky together with the clouds—transformed and beautiful.

GLOWING DROPS

Last night I tramped home from the forest on dragging feet, but nothing could dampen my joy that I had witnessed the beginning of this lusty spring with its flowers and birdsongs.

The early willows in the bare forest are like dreams, like a vision. Ah, the morels, the primroses, the anemones, the mezereon, the light falling on the buds, the glow of the drops on the twigs!

BEFORE DARK

In the middle of the day it grew very warm from the hot wind, and that evening a new phase in the development of spring became defined. Everything happened almost simultaneously:

the early willow bloomed, the thrush burst into full-throated song, a ripple was started on the surface of the ponds by the frogs, and the air rang with a great variety of voices. The shrews were in their element in the aspen leaves, much as fish in the sea, and felt as safe there.

TIME TO BRING OUT THE BEEHIVES

Sometimes in the daytime the bits of pale, melting ice in the meadow seem to duplicate the bits of the pale crescent moon, melting away in the rays of the sun.

A large bird of prey, returning from the south, came flying straight at me and when it recognised me for what I was it swung round abruptly and flew back.

The magpies, hearing the ice crackling under my feet, responded from the depths of the forest with alarmed cries. The ice also crackled simply from the sun. In their forest depths the magpies understood the meaning of the two kinds of sound, and responded only to the one I made.

The wood pigeons have begun to flock together.

I suppose it is time to bring out the beehives.

THE FROZEN ICE CRUST

It was another fair day with a sunny frost, with streams running along the ruts in the road,

and a hot time for me in a forest piled high with snow.

Sinking belly-deep in the snow, I clambered out on to the glade across which runs my favourite stream. I found where the water came out from under the snow near some birches, and photographed it as the beginning of the spring of water. The ice crust had frozen so hard the night before that you did not sink through it everywhere, but if sink you did you were asking for trouble. Early in the morning you can go deep into the forest, walking on the ice crust, but if you don't return by midday when the sun turns its heat on you have to stay there till night and wait for the frost to pave the road for you again.

SPRING CLEANING

In just a few more days, at most a week, nature will start covering up all this incredible chaos in the forest with flowers, grasses, green moss, and thin new shoots. It is touching to see how carefully nature camouflages the forest's dry, yellow, dead skeleton twice a year—with flowers in spring, and with snow in winter.

The hazelnut bushes and alders are still in bloom, their golden catkins even now spray a whiff of pollen when touched by a bird, but they are past being a miracle now; the dominant and amazing wonder are the masses of little blue star-shaped flowers. Flowering mezereon is also amazing.

The ice has melted on the forest road, the horse dung has remained, and on it, as though sensing its value, the firs and pines have cast hundreds of seeds.

SPRING ADVANCES

The barometer is dropping, but instead of warm, blessed rain there has come a cold wind. But spring is advancing just the same. In the course of this day the meadows have all turned green, first along the edge of streams, then up the southern slope of the banks, then alongside the roads, and finally everywhere. The fields made a beautiful pattern of black and green, with the black rows of upturned earth gradually overflowing the green. Today the buds on the bird-cherry trees turned into tiny green spears. The catkins on the hazelnut bushes have begun to shed pollen and every bird flitting in the grove starts up a smoky whiff.

TEARS OF JOY

We went to Teribrovo after wood-grouse; we set out at one o'clock in the morning and tramped the forest futilely under pouring rain until eight. Not a bird gave a squeak. On our way back I saw an aspen with swollen buds, it was the very one which smelt so strongly in the frosty darkness. And the rain went on pouring.

In the bleak light of morning the forest stood washed in tears of sorrow or joy, you could not tell which. But we could hear singing even indoors, and we understood then that the birch outside our window was weeping tears of joy, not sorrow.

HARE WOOL

Snow is a very rare sight now. White hare wool, torn out in springtime fights or shed when moulting, has settled on the dark ground. There were so many hares that year that tufts of white wool can be seen all over the litter of grey aspen leaves.

BIRCHES IN BLOOM

When old birches begin to bloom and their golden catkins hide from view the little green leaves high up, we see bright-green leaves the size of a raindrop on all the young trees down below, but even so the prevailing colour in the forest is grey or brown, so when you come upon a bird-cherry tree, you are astonished by the brilliance and size of its leaves against this background. The flower buds on the bird-cherry trees are ready to open. The cuckoo sings in its fruitiest voice, while the nightingale is only clearing, tuning up.

THE TURNING-POINT

In the daytime there were both wispy clouds on one level and a vast fleet of the cumuli on another, and we could not tell which was coming and which was passing—a cyclone or an anticyclone.

And that evening everything became clear: it was precisely that evening that the long-awaited turning-point came—from bare to green spring.

This is how we knew. We went to the forest wilds to reconnoitre. The remains of the yellow reeds on the hummocks between the firs and the birches made us realise once again how impenetrable for the sunrays were these thickets in summer and in autumn. But we liked it there, it was warmer in the thickets and there was a feeling of spring. Suddenly we saw a gleam of water, and joyously recognised our own Nerle. We went to the river and found ourselves in another country with a warm climate. The place was seething with life, all the marsh birds were singing, the snipe, the double-snipe and the blackcock were singing mating songs, a flight of cranes gave their signal just overhead, even some ducks alighted on the clean water in front of us, and in short everything that we loved best was here for us to relish, and not a human sound, no voices, no whistling, no chugging of motors.

That was the hour of the turning-point, and now everything began to grow and bloom.

THE FIRST GREEN MURMUR

The western sky was clear, but in the east a rumbling came from the grey clouds now and again, and it was so sweltering that a thunderstorm seemed imminent that night. Masses of blue snapdragons were flowering in the fields, and wood sorrel and wild sweet peas in the forest. Birch leaves, permeated with fragrant pitch, glittered in the sun. There was a smell of bird-cherry blossoms everywhere. The bream and the carp came close to the bank.

We saw a glow in the sky where our house was, and our hearts cringed with fear. But then we saw that nothing was on fire and wondered what it was, as one always does, failing to recognise the thing every time. When the rim of a large disc appeared at last, we stopped fretting, knowing that it was that kind of moon. The flashes of lightning in the sky beyond the lake went on and off for a long time yet.

In the light breeze we heard the first green murmur that year.

THE FIRST CUCKOO CALL

When we saw the lake spread out before us, we could think of nothing else to do except go along the edge of the water to the woods at once, and then through the woods to Ussolye, where the village boats were made.

To the right of us rose a tall, loudly rustling

pine forest, and to the left an impassable wooded swamp spreading vast and desolate after the trees had thinned out. We caught some moving shadows in the forest where the sun spots danced on the red bilberry shrubs, and craning my neck I guessed, rather than saw, that the shadows were made by kites flying soundlessly from one pine to another.

"Look how cold it was, and yesterday the weather suddenly made a turn," the forester said to me.

"Still, the dawn was rather chilly," I said.

"But did you hear how the birds clamoured this morning?"

A bird's cry rang out, hardly recognisable as a cuckoo's, because it reverberated all through the forest. Even the finches, these little birds, also clamoured, rather than sang. The whole forest was a-clamour, while the large birds of prey, noiseless and identifiable only by their shadows, flew from one tree-top to another.

A SHREW

Suddenly, before my very eyes, the old leaves trampled down securely by rains and snow reared up, some of the leaves stood up on end, a tiny squeak sounded in one place, a small pointed muzzle poked out in another, and then the whole animal, no bigger than a thimble, crawled out.

* * *

We found a shrew in the new ditch which we had dug yesterday. This is the smallest animal, and as we walk about the forest we never stop to think that there's one, or even two, living underground wherever we step. Its coat is somewhat like a mole's, the fur is short, smooth, thick and bluish-black. It does not look like a mouse at all. Ours was very lively, it jumped high in the glass jar where we had put it, and when we gave it a worm it gobbled it up at once. Petya started digging a new ditch, and when he found a worm he gave it to our shrew. We wondered how many worms it could eat in a row and tried to find it out this way. After that we decided to test it for its eating capacity as such, and gave it all kinds of food. And then we wanted to verify the allegation that a direct sunray kills the shrew. If the animal was killed we were going to measure and weigh it, examine its inner organs, put the whole thing on an anthill and thus get a clean-pecked skeleton. Oh, there was no end of things we wanted to do. One of them was to get a mole and put the two of them together.

But all our schemes came to nothing: the shrew jumped out of that twelve-centimetre high jar, and vanished in the ground that very same instant, much as a fish dives into water.

This extraordinary little animal occupied my thoughts for a long time, and directed them underground where the tree roots were immersed.

REFLECTION

The water was so still today that a live snipe hovering over it and its reflection were perfectly identical. On our first walk in spring I allowed Lada to chase birds. She saw the two snipe, flying straight at her, and prepared to pounce. Which of the two snipe had she chosen, the one flying over the water or its reflection?

It was Lada's business to chase after a flying snipe, and mine to chase after some bluebird of my own in my word-weaving. To avoid chasing a phantom, isn't that my main concern?

My poor Lada has chosen the reflection and thinking that the snipe was as good as caught made a leap and tumbled into the water.

VISITORS

We had visitors. First a wagtail came out of sheer curiosity, just to take a look at us. Not far from our house there were stacks and stacks of timber (they've been there for two years waiting to be rafted down the river). There was enough firewood there to heat our house for at least fifty years, that's what a lot there was! In those two years of exposure to wind, rain and sun, the timber turned dark, many of the stacks leaned lop-sidedly, and some scattered picturesquely. The rotting wood made a splendid breeding ground for all kinds of insects, and wagtails came to live there in great numbers.

We soon found a way of photographing these little birds close to: if you saw one sitting on the far side of the stack you had to whistle, let it see you and quickly duck. The curious little bird would come running along the edge of the stack and look down at you from the very log on which you had already trained your camera. It was very much like a game of hide-and-seek, played by an old chap and a little bird.

A crane came down on the other side of the river amid the hummocks in the yellow swamp, and started walking about, bending over.

A fish-hawk hovered in the air, looking for prey down below.

A black kite wheeled high overhead.

Then came a hen-harrier, a lover of birds' eggs, and here all the wagtails flew out of the stacks and went after him like a swarm of mosquitoes. The crows, fearing for their nests, joined the wagtails. The huge hen-harrier made a very sorry sight as he flew in a panic from his angry pursuers.

You could hear a cuckoo calling without a pause somewhere in the forest.

A heron flew up from the dry, old rushes.

A black-grouse was muttering close by.

A yellow bunting peeped as it sat swinging on a slender stalk.

From a heap of old leaves came the tiny squeak of a shrew.

And when it grew still warmer, the leaves of the bird-cherry trees opened up, like little birds with green wings alighting on the branches,

and after that came the wood anemone, the mezereon and other flowers, and finally green buds appeared on all the levels of the forest.

There was also the early willow, a bee was attracted to it, then a bumble-bee came buzzing, and a butterfly alighted on a twig and folded its wings.

We saw the flicker of a shaggy, worried fox in the rushes.

A viper was sunning itself, curled up on a hummock.

It seemed that this wonderful season would go on forever. But just today, as I went jumping from one hummock to the next in the swamp, I noticed something in the water and, bending down, saw masses of mosquito larvae. Before long the mosquitoes would emerge, stand on their legs on the water which is like solid ground to them, and set off on their buzzing flight. And then the sunny day would turn grey from these bloodsuckers. But, on the other hand, this great army protected the chastity of the swampy forest from exploitation by summer residents.

Roaches came in plenty. Two fishermen arrived in a boat. As soon as we had packed, ready to leave, they started a fire where we had just put out ours, hung up a cooking pot, scraped the fish a bit, threw it into the pot, and then ate the fish soup without bread.

It was probably here, on the only dry spot in the swamp, that the primordial fisherman also made his fire. It was here that our car was parked

too. When we rolled up our tent where we had our kitchen, a flight of buntings came and started pecking on the ground where it had stood. These buntings were our last visitors.

THE GIRL AND THE BIRCHES

The new leaves were only just appearing on the birches, and the woods seemed so vast, so virginal. I did not think the train an encroaching monstrosity and, on the contrary found it very convenient as, sitting at the window, I could feast my eyes on the continuous stretch of these lacy birch woods. At the next window stood a girl, a young girl but not very good looking. Now and then she would glance warily about, like a bird fearing that a hawk might be watching it. And then she'd poke her head out of the window again.

I wanted to see what she was like in that unguarded moment, alone with the birches, and so I got up quietly and peeped out of another window. She was gazing at the radiantly young foliage, smiling, whispering something, and her cheeks were glowing.

ORIOLES

The candle-flowers on the pines were now visible from afar. The trees had put on their finery, and the grasses and flowers were tall

and lush. The birds of early spring sang no more: the cocks were moulting and had gone into hiding, and the hens were brooding in their nests. The wild beasts were busy looking for food for their young. And the peasants went short of everything during the spring ordeal of ploughing and sowing.

The orioles, quails, martins and shore swallows had come. There was a thick mist in the morning after the night's rain, but during the daytime it was nice and sunny, though somewhat cool. In the late afternoon the wind turned, blowing from our hill to the lake now, but the ripples on the water ran towards us as before for a long time yet. The sun was setting into the forest from a dark blue cloud, and looked like a shaggy ball with no glow in it.

The orioles love changeable, unsettled weather, when the sun comes and goes and the wind plays with the leaves making them ripple like waves. The orioles, swallows, seagulls and martins are of the same kin as the wind, of course.

It was dark in the morning. There was a closeness in the air, and then a large cloud came our way. The wind started up, and to the fluting of the orioles and the screams of the martins the cloud dropped quite out of sight beyond the lakes somewhere, into the forest, but very soon it gathered strength there and advanced upon us against the wind, a sinister black cloud with an enormous white cap. The lake was flustered, what with the gusts of wind

and the waves colliding, and black patches like the shadows of wings went racing over the water from one end to the other. Lightning revealed the opposite shore in a flash, and thunder roared. The orioles stopped singing, and the martins also grew quiet. But a nightingale went on singing, undaunted by the storm, and what must have stopped it was probably a large raindrop hitting it on the head. And now the rain came down in torrents.

CHILDREN AND DUCKLINGS

This was an extraordinarily happy morning of liberation: I set Nerle free from the leash and in gratitude she showed me how splendidly she could point, and then I gave that shepherd liberty not to read my story... And that very same morning a small wild duck worked up the courage at last to take her ducklings out of the woods and, skirting the village, bring them to the lake and freedom. In the spring flood the lake spread very wide, and the nearest spot of solid ground to build a nest on was about three versts away on a hummock in the swampy forest. And now that the water had dropped, the duck and her family had to waddle all these three versts back to the lake. In places secure from the eyes of man, fox and hawk, the duck walked behind her brood, never letting any of her ducklings stray out of sight. She did that crossing the road near the smithy, and here

some youngsters saw the ducklings and started chasing them, throwing their caps at them. The frightened mother-duck ran after the boys with her mouth wide open, or made short flights this way and that in terrible anxiety. The boys were on the point of knocking her down with their caps and catching her like they did the ducklings, when I came up and stopped them feeling elated because my training had proved a success and thinking of the great creative power which every living creature derived from its sense of freedom.

"What are you going to do with the ducklings?" I asked the boys.

"We'll let them go," they replied in a funk.

"You'd better," I told them very angrily. "Why did you have to catch them in the first place? Where's the mother-duck now?"

"Over there! " All the boys replied together, and pointed to a hump in the field a few steps away where the duck was sitting with her mouth still wide open.

"Take the ducklings back to her at once," I told the boys. "Quickly! "

They actually welcomed the order, it seemed, and ran off at once to the duck. She flew off a little way, and when the boys left, rushed to the rescue of her sons and daughters. She said something to them quickly, and ran to the oats field, with the ducklings, five in all, following her. And now the family continued on its journey to the lake along this field, skirting the village.

I took off my cap and waved, shouting happily:

"Good luck, ducklings! "

The boys laughed at me, and I said:

"You'd laugh, you little sillies? D'you think it's such a simple matter for those ducklings to reach the lake? You just wait till you have some real goal to reach and see how easy it is. Meanwhile, doff your caps and wish them goodbye."

They doffed the caps that had been kicked about in the dust when they were catching the ducklings, tossed them in the air and shouted:

"Goodbye, ducklings! "

HONEY

The cold weather that happens in May was over, it was warm now and the bird-cherry blossoms withered. But then the buds on the rowans had swollen noticeably, and the lilacs were beginning to blossom. When the rowan blossoms it will mean the end of spring, when the berries turn red it will mean the end of summer, and then we'll open the hunting season and everywhere we go in the woods we'll come across these red berries, all autumn long.

It is impossible to describe the smell of bird-cherry blossoms exactly, for there's nothing to compare it with. The first time I smell it in spring I always remember my childhood, I remember my parents and think that they, too,

had loved the smell and, like me, could not have described it. In the days of my forefathers, of my ancestors who lived at the time when the ballad of Prince Igor and his host was being sung, and in the days of people who lived earlier still in times out of mind, there had been bird-cherry trees too, there had been nightingales, there had been all the many different grasses, flowers and songbirds, and various sensations and emotions connected with them, combining into our national self-awareness. Just the smell of bird-cherry blossoms alone links you with Russia's past. And now they were withering. I buried my nose in the flowers for the last time, and for the last time I vainly hoped to tell what the smell was like. To my amazement I discovered that the flowers smelt of honey. Of course, just before their end, the flowers smell not of themselves but of honey, and this tells me that they had not lived in vain... Never mind that they are shedding now, think of all the honey that has been gathered!

MARTINS

After the rain the weather turned suddenly very cold and a strong northern wind started up. The martins and shore-swallows literally came tumbling from somewhere.

The wind blew continuously day and night, and today, with the sun shining its fullest, the white-capped waves ran on and on, masses of

martins, shore, village and city swallows went tirelessly streaking there and back, and then all the seagulls came flying in a body from Gremyach, like bluebirds in a fairy-tale, only they were not blue but white against the blue. White birds, blue sky, white caps on the waves, black swallows, and all living creatures engaged in the same double purpose: to devour and to endure being devoured. Midges swarm and fall in the water, fish surface to devour the midges, seagulls swoop down to devour the fish, the gudgeon goes after the worm, the perch goes after the gudgeon, the pike goes after the perch, and a fish-hawk drops on the pike.

At dawn, when the wind had subsided somewhat, we set sail before the wind on the molten crests of the waves. Quite close to us a fish-hawk swooped down on a pike, but the pike was bigger and stronger than the bird and after a short struggle it began to submerge. The hawk flapped its huge wings, but it could not pull free its claws, imbedded in the body of the fish, and the water predator pulled the air predator into the deep. The waves carried away the feathers dispassionately and washed away all signs of the mortal battle.

In the middle of the lake where the water was deepest and waves rose very high, we saw a small boat with no one in it, and no oars or sail. That empty, tossing boat had something as blood-chilling about it as the sight of a driverless horse and cart heading straight for a precipice. Our own boat was not too safe, but

still we decided to go nearer and make sure that no one had come to grief in that boat. And suddenly a man rose from the bottom of the boat, picked up his oar and started rowing against the waves.

We almost shouted for joy at the appearance of a human being in that empty world, although we realised, of course, that he was simply a tired fisherman who had been taking a nap. It didn't matter what he was: we had longed for the sight of man, and there he was.

THE FROGS HAVE COME AWAKE

We were ambushed in the hut all night with our decoy duck. At dawn it turned so cold that the water froze, I became chilled to the bone, felt unwell all day and by evening was running a temperature. The next day I spent in bed, taking no conscious part in the struggle between life and death. At sunrise on the third day I dreamed about the intricately cut shore of Plescheyevo Lake and white seagulls riding the blue water close to the numerous ice spits. I'd seen it exactly like that in real life. How nice those white seagulls had looked against the blue water, how many wonderful things had been in store for me yet! I would see the whole lake completely free of ice, I'd see green grass carpeting the ground and the birches in leaf, and I'd hear the first green murmur.

It had been getting warmer since yesterday

and thunder rumbled faintly in the distance.

Still weak from the struggle but feeling happy because victory was mine, I left my bed, went to the window and saw the entire lawn in front of the house literally covered with all kinds of small birds—there were many finches, blackbirds and grey thrushes, all of them running about, hopping, and bathing in a large puddle. So the songbirds had arrived en masse.

Our dogs, tied to trees, started barking all of a sudden and stared stupidly at the ground.

"The thunder must have done something," my neighbour said and pointed to where the dogs were staring.

A frog, its wet back gleaming, was leaping straight at the dogs and just before they could snatch it swerved and made for the puddle.

The frogs had come alive, and apparently it was the thunder's doing. The life of frogs is somehow linked with thunder. A crash of thunder—and alive came the frogs, leaping about with their wet backs gleaming in the sun, and all of them making for the puddle. I went to get a closer look at them, and they all poked their heads out to look at me, terribly curious creatures they are.

There were lots of insects flying about in the sun and no counting the birds on the lawn. But today, first time out of bed, I didn't want to remember their names. Today I felt the life of nature as one entity and wanted no names. I felt related to all those flying, swimming and hopping creatures, and for each of them there

was a memory-image in my soul which stirred in my blood after millions of years: all of them were in me, I only had to look and recognise.

My today's thoughts were simple, stemming from my sense of being alive. Illness had come between me and life for a short time, and now I had to recover what I had lost. Thus, millions of years ago, we lost our wings which were as beautiful as the seagulls', and because it was so very long ago we admire them so rapturously now.

We lost our ability to swim like fish, to swing on a branch attached to a mighty trunk, or to flit at will like flying seeds, and all this we find so appealing because it was ours, a part of ourselves, only very, very long ago. We are related to the whole world, we are now reconstructing the link by the sheer strength of our interested attention, and we discover our own private traits in people living a different life, and even in animals and plants.

By noon, like yesterday, a warm rain started, following upon a small rumble of thunder. Within an hour the ice on the lake became transparent, absorbing the blue of the sky as it had done in the inlets, and the lake now looked like a single and vast expanse of water.

After sundown, the forest paths became swathed in mist, and at every dozen steps you flushed a pair of hazel-grouse. The wood-grouse were clucking for all they were worth, the whole forest seemed to be muttering and hissing. Woodcock could be heard too.

There were triple lights in the forest: the blue stars high up in the sky, larger yellow city lights on the horizon, and the fishermen's red torches flaring into enormous lights on the lake. When some of these lights came nearer to us on the shore, we could see the torches smoking and the men, armed with harpoons, much like the figures with the dragons on the Olbia and Panticapaeum vases.

THE FIRST NIGHTINGALE

When we entered the lake from the river we heard a bittern bellowing in the osiers. This grey bird roars like a beast the size of a hippopotamus at the very least. The lake was again perfectly calm and the water clear, for the light breeze had been sweeping it clean all day. The smallest sound carried very far.

We could hear the bittern drawing in water, and then a silence-shattering bellow, again and again. It would be quiet for ten minutes or so, and then a bellow as many as three or four times in a row. Six was the most we ever heard.

I steered along the bank, in the shade, after hearing in Ussolye the horrible story of a fisherman who had been tossed by the waves for hours, hugging the bottom of his capsized dugout. I fancied I heard a nightingale singing in that shade. Every sound carried to us in the boat—cranes crying good-night somewhere very far away, widgeons whistling, pochards fight-

ing a war, and then a general hubbub raised by all the duck breeds, and somewhere quite near a mallard copulating passionately with his mate. Here and there the loons and pochards stuck their necks out of the water like false markers. In a splash of pinkish water we saw the white belly of a small pike and the black head of the big pike that had seized it.

And then clouds spread over the whole of the sky, I could not find a single point to take my hearings from, and kept steering to the left all the time towards the shore darkling remotely. Every time the bittern bellowed we counted and made wishes. It was amazing that the sound carried to us so clearly from two versts away, then from three, and then all of seven when we could already hear the singing of the countless nightingales in Gremyach Hill.

MAY BUGS

The bird-cherry trees had not yet shed their blossoms and the early willows had not scattered their seeds, and here were the rowans, the apple trees and the yellow acacias already in flower, one catching up with the other, to burst into flower all together. It was that kind of spring.

The May bugs have appeared in great numbers.

In the early morning the lake was so thickly strewn with the seeds of the flowering trees and grasses that the wake behind my boat remained

visible for a long time like a newly cleared road. Where a duck had been sitting a cleared circle was left, and where a fish had poked out its head—a hole.

Forest and lake were locked in a close embrace.

I stepped ashore to savour the fragrance of the pitchy new leaves. A great pine had been felled and all the branches chopped off; they lay beside the tree and heaped on top of them were the branches of an aspen and an alder, their leaves withered. And as all these mutilated limbs of the different trees rotted together they gave off a wonderful smell, to the great amazement of living creatures who could not understand how anything could live and, what's more, die so fragrantly.

THUNDERSTORM

Towards dinner-time the wind started blowing in earnest, and it was unnerving to hear the still bare young aspens in the thick grove knocking against one another. A thunderstorm broke out that night. Lada crawled under my bed from fright. She was so panic-stricken that she did not even notice that the thunderstorm had long passed. At six in the morning, however, I dragged her outside and showed her how fine and clear the weather was, and then she quickly came back to her senses.

BLOSSOMTIME IS OVER

Bird-cherry blossoms are scattered all over the burdocks, the nettles, and the green grass. Its blossomtime is over. But then the elders have begun to flower and at their foot the strawberries. Lilies-of-the-valley are also opening, the dun coloured leaves of the aspens have turned a tender green, and the oats have sprouted in straight green spikes, like little toy soldiers standing on the black ground. In the bogs the sedge has risen tall to cast a green shade over the abysmal black water and now caddis-flies started dancing on it and blue dragonflies are flying from one green sedge island to another.

I walked along a white path trodden through a thicket of nettles and the smell was so strong that my whole body began to itch. Thrushes screamed in alarm as they chased a rapacious crow away from their nests. Everything is so interesting, every smallest thing in the life of these countless creatures is relevant to the nuptial movement in the world in general.

THE EYES OF THE EARTH

Towards evening the wind dropped so completely that not a leaf stirred on the birch. More and more people were going somewhere along the road running at the foot of Gremyach Hill. On a sandy path of the road I saw a child's footprint, it was so small and sweet that I could have

kissed it if there was no one to see and laugh.

The talk of the people driving along in carts rebounded from the still water and was clearly heard on Gremyach Hill. A foal ran beside practically each cart. Snatches of the peasants' talk reached my ears: they had finished planting their potatoes, some Dmitry Pavlov or other had lost his wife and married again even before the forty days were out, but there was nothing for it, left as he was with six young children on his hands. And Maria had married Yakov Grigoryev, she was forty and he was sixty, and she owned a heifer, too. People in the rear cart didn't catch what it was Maria owned, and the word was passed down the whole train—hei-fer!

The air was so still now that you could clearly hear the bittern bellowing seven versts away.

And afterwards, when a peasant woman went down to the lake with her little boy to rinse her wash and the boy lifted his shirt to pee in the water, the mother's words carried so clearly as if she were standing beside us.

"What are you doing, for shame? Pissing in the eyes of your mother..."

So the lake was to her the eyes of Mother Earth? As usual, in such cases, I asked my landlady what she thought about it.

"The eyes of Mother Earth, naturally," she replied. "And mothers in general too: if a woman's eyes get inflamed, everyone in the village will say that her child must have pissed in water."

Thus, of this ancient cult only superstition remains, while the poetic image of the eyes of Mother Earth is relegated to the loftier spheres of culture.

It was impossible to fall asleep on this scented night, and the eyes of Mother Earth never closed.

A BRANCHY TIMBER

The little forest stream became so thickly strewn with the pollen shed by the flowering plants that it no longer reflected the trees or the clouds. In spring, the bridge to the other side is a great branchy timber which is so high above ground that if you fall off it you'll break a lot of bones. Nobody needs it now, of course, there are stepping stones in the stream and crossing it is easy. But a squirrel was walking along the timber and carrying some long thing in its mouth. It would stop, fiddle with that long thing, bite off a bit perhaps, and continue on its way. I followed it, and near the end of the timber I gave it a scare in the hope that it would drop the loot and I'd see what it was, or else would leap to the aspen. True enough, it raced up the aspen, without dropping whatever it was carrying, and then made a huge leap to the top of a fir, and hid there in the thick crown.

ASPEN FLUFF

I picked some catkins off an aspen and scattered the fluff. There were bees flying against the wind, against the sun, and I could not tell which it was—catkin fluff or a bee, a seed flying to proliferate or an insect flying after nectar.

The night was so still that by morning the flying fluff had settled on the roads and backwaters, and they seemed to be covered with snow. I remembered that aspen grove where the fluff had settled in a thick layer. We set fire to it, the flame darted about the grove, and everything turned black.

Flying aspen fluff is a major springtime event. That's when the nightingales, the cuckoos and the orioles are in song. But you can already hear the summer kinglets singing too.

Every spring the sight of that flying fluff distresses me: it's such a waste of seeds, perhaps even worse than the waste of roe during spawning, and the thought depresses and worries me.

When the fluff comes flying from the old trees, the young aspens shed their brown infant garb and change into their adult green, like village girls showing off their different finery at a dance.

After the rain the sun turned the forest into a hot-house with a cloying scent of growth and decay, that is, the growth of birch buds and new grass, and the decay of last year's leaves with a

fragrance of its own. Green grass sprouted through everything—old hay, stubble, yellow hummocks. The catkins on the birches have also turned green. Aspen catkins fall, shedding their seed fluff, and get caught on everything in their way. Last year's thickly tasselled couch-grass had stood here tall and proud only the other day and as it swayed in the wind it must have frightened many a hare and bird out of their wits. And now a grey aspen catkin has dropped on it, breaking the stalk forever; the new green grass will hide it out of sight, but this will not be soon, it will take spring a long time to clothe the old yellow skeleton in new green flesh.

For three days now the wind has been sowing the aspen seeds, but the ground keeps demanding more and more. Again a breeze started up, and you could not see the ground for the catkins. Millions of seeds settled, yet only a few will sprout, but even so the aspen grove will be so thick at first that a hare will not get through and will have to run round it.

Very soon the young aspens will start fighting each other with their roots for room in the ground and with their branches for light. The grove will thin out, and when the trees have grown as tall as a man the hares will come here to gnaw the bark. When the light-loving trees reach their full height, young firs will sprout under their shady wing, huddling shyly to the aspens, and little by little they will outgrow them and with their own shade smother those

light-loving trees with their constantly trembling leaves.

When a whole aspen wood dies, supplanted by an impenetrable fir forest with the wind howling through it, and only on tree survives somewhere, standing apart in a glade, woodpeckers will start hammering at the trunk, starlings will build their homes in the woodpeckers' tree-holes, wild pigeons, tomtits, squirrels and martens will come to stay in one of the many holes at one time or another. And when at last this old tree collapses, the local hares will come there in the winter to gnaw the bark, and after the hares will come the foxes, and it will be a sort of gathering place for the wild beasts. The whole forest world with its numerous connections is represented here, I think.

A DISGRUNTLED FROG

The frogs became so frisky that even the water looked troubled. And then they climbed out and dispersed over the ground, and that evening you could not walk a step without coming upon a frog.

It was a warm night, and all the frogs were purring softly, even the ones who were discontented with their fate. It was such a wonderful night that the most disgruntled frog of all also came out and started purring like the rest.

THE FIRST CRAYFISH

Thunder rolled and rain poured, but the sun shone through the rain and a huge rainbow appeared in the sky. The bird-cherry trees blossomed, and the wild currant shrubs on the very edge of the water turned green. And then the first crayfish poked its head out of its cave and twitched a whisker.

A GLORIOUS MORNING

It was a glorious, radiant morning with the first real dew. Fish leapt for joy. On the hill two puffed-up blackcocks were strutting about and with them were six hens. One of the cocks would walk round his harem, the way a bull deer walks round his cows, and when he met the other cock in his path he chased him off, walked round the hens again, and again started fighting.

In the grey woods the early willows burst into flower. The blossoms on this tree look like fluffy yellow chicks, and the fragrance that spreads through the forest is like honey.

THE FOREST EDGE

The forest edge is always a haven of life, whether at the beginning of the day or the beginning of the year.

When the sun rises everything comes awake, but down below, in the deep, dark gullies, nothing stirs until well into the morning.

Inch-tall flax grows along the forest edge, and in the midst of the flax—a horsetail! Spangled with dewdrops and with the early sun shining upon it it looks like an Oriental wonder.

When the dew dried on the horsetail, the dragonflies became cautious and darted away in fear from its shadow...

RED CONES

In the daytime the summer heat was kept down by the cold dew and the fresh wind, and that's why it was still possible to walk about in the woods, otherwise there'd be swarms of gadflies at midday, and mosquitoes in the morning and in the evening. Ordinarily it was a time when horses, maddened by the flies, bolted, carts and all.

I went to the forest across the fields on this fresh sunny morning. The glade was drenched in cold dew, the insects were asleep, and many of the flowers had not yet opened. Nothing was astir but the aspen leaves, tiny drops of dew still clinging to their velvety underside, while on the smooth side they were already dry.

I said good-morning to the young firs I knew well, and asked them how they were. They re-

plied that everything was fine with them, and that since I'd seen them last their red cones had grown to half their proper size. It was true, I could see it for myself where the old empty cones hung beside the young ones.

From the fir abysses I emerged to the sunlit forest edge, on the way there I happened upon a lily-of-the-valley which still retained its shape but had turned waxen and no longer had any fragrance.

FLOWERING GRASSES

Like the rye sown in the fields all the cereal grasses in the meadows were also flowering, and when some insect alighted to swing on a flowering stem it wreathed itself in pollen as in a tiny cloud of golden dust.

All the grasses were flowering, even the plantains—a mere weed, but it, too, was covered with tiny white beads.

There were all those various beads, buttons and tiny ears to greet us. How many of them have lived their cycle in our lifetime, but they seem like the good old friends I've always known. Good-morning to you, my dears, good-morning once again!

THE FIR AND THE BIRCH

The fir is beautiful only in dazzling sunlight because then its usual dismal blackness has an

inner glow of the richest, deepest green. As for the birch, it's pretty in rain or shine, and on the bleakest grey day.

YOUR MUSHROOM

The small glades here seem to be linked rather than separated by the bushes, and when you emerge from these bushes there's your mushroom waiting to be picked. It's *your* mushroom, no need to go looking for it, it's there, facing you.

PANSIES

When a completely black butterfly with only a thin white edge alights on something, it looks triangular, like a moth. There's one small butterfly we all know very well, a blue one. When it alights on a blade of grass it appears to be a flower. You'll walk past, never thinking it's a butterfly, just a small pansy.

THE WILLOW-HERB

Summer has come. In the cool of the woods the wild orchid, a white porcelain beauty, has opened to scent the air, and in the sunlight, next to a tree stump, rose the willow-herb, the glory of our woods, to its full, handsome height.

BEASTS

People use "beast" as a swear word, the worst thing they can say about a person is that "he's a real beast". And yet the store of tenderness in beasts is truly inexhaustible. You realise how much love there is in nature when you see a young animal parted from its mother and given a foster mother instead.

A tiny blind fox-cub was taken out of the den and given to a cat to nurse together with her own kittens. And this cat adored the fox who cuddled up to her as if she were its own mother.

A cat was not allowed to keep her litter, and then another cat kittened in the same basket and was allowed to keep just one. Both cats fed the kitten; when its real mother went out, the other cat climbed into the basket, and it was as if an imperative urge was contained in her milk which made all strange creatures kin. A tiger, let alone a wolf, will also gaze up with enormous tenderness into the eyes of someone who has cared for it since infancy and became a mother to him.

As for dogs, they have a special fondness for man, incomparable with that of any other animal. In character this love is similar to the love of little blind beasts for their foster mother. The dog, wrenched out of wild life, has probably retained its sense of loss of the whole of Mother Nature, and taking man on faith surrendered to him as to a mother. The capacity for affection in beasts and wild life in general is most noticeable in dogs.

A FOREST CEMETERY

A strip of forest was felled for firewood, but for some reason the timbers were not carted away but were simply left lying there, and in places you could not see them at all for the young aspen grove with the huge pale-green leaves and the thickly growing firs. For those who understand the life of the forest there is nothing more interesting than such clearings, because the forest is a closed book while a clearing is a page opened in that book. After the pines had been felled, the sunlight poured in and encouraged the growth of the grasses to such a gigantic stature that they left no room for the pine and fir seeds to sprout. Aspens, however, triumph even over grass and they struck root here in spite of the odds, and showed a vigorous growth, like shaggy, lop-eared youngsters. Once the aspens have smothered the grass, the shade-loving firs begin to grow among them, clinging close, and that is why firs usually replace pines in such clearings. But here there was a mixed forest, and the most important thing of all was that the patches of moss which had been swamped now revived and looked bright and cheerful.

The whole life of the forest in all its many forms could be read from this clearing. There was moss with its blue and red berries, red moss and green moss, patterned in minute or large stars, here and there you saw patches of white Iceland moss dotted with red bilberries.

Everywhere, young pines, firs and birches had sprung up round the old stumps and looked radiantly green in contrast. This vigorous life inspired happy hopes, and the black stumps, which once had been tall trees, were not a depressing sight, making one think of a graveyard.

Trees die in different ways. The birch, for instance, rots from inside, and for a long time you mistake its white trunk for a living tree. But inside there's only rotten wood. The trunk is like a sponge saturated with water and quite heavy; if a tree like that is given a push, the top pieces will fall heavily, they might even kill the person standing beneath it. You often see a birch stump that stands there like a flower pot: only the pitchy bark remains white and impervious to decay, while inside, in the rot, flowers and saplings sprout. When the firs and pines die, they first of all shed their bark, it falls off them in pieces like clothes, and lies in a pile under the tree. Next, the crown drops off, then the branches, and finally the stump itself falls to pieces.

Multitudes of flowers, mushrooms and ferns always hasten to make up for the disintegration of a great tree. But, more important, it is the tree itself that continues to live in the sapling growing close to the stump. For its part, bright-green moss, patterned in large stars and tiny brown hammers, hastens to cover up the dead tree's bare knees which had once held it up in the ground, and very often you find red russulas, as large as a saucer, growing in this moss. Pale-

green ferns, red strawberries, bilberries and bog whortleberries throng round the ruins to hide them from view. Sometimes, a creeping cranberry needs to climb over the dead stump for some purpose of its own, and its blood-red berries and tiny leaves add another touch of beauty to the ruins.

THE DARK FOREST

It's good in a dark forest on a brilliant sunny day, for besides being nice and cool, wonders are played by the light: a thrush or a jay flying across a ray of sunlight looks like a bird of paradise, and the leaves of the most ordinary rowan flare up with a fantastic green light.

As you go down to the river the thickets grow more and more impenetrable and the shade cooler until at last through the blackness you catch a glimpse of the water between the alders with hops creeping all over them, and the wet sand along its edge. You have to step very softly, for you might see a turtle-dove drinking water. And afterwards you can look at its prints in the sand and of many forest dwellers besides... Now, that was a fox who passed here.

It's called a dark forest because the sun looks into it, as into the window of a dark house, and cannot see everything there is inside. For instance, it cannot see the burrows of the badgers with the well-stamped sandy playground

for the young. A great number of burrows have been dug here and all because of the foxes who will usurp a burrow and with their stench and filth drive out the owner. But it's a wonderful spot, the badgers don't want to move anywhere else: there's this sandy bank, gullies all round, and the forest so dense that the sun cannot see anything through the little window.

A STUMP TURNED ANT-HILL

There are old stumps in the forest which, like Swiss cheese, are pocked with tiny holes but have nevertheless kept their solid shape. When you sit down on it you probably squash the walls between the holes and they cave in. The moment you feel that you are sagging, get up at once, because multitudes of ants will crawl out from each little hole under you and the pocked stump will turn out to be an ant-hill which has retained the appearance of a stump.

ENCROACHING UPON A GLADE

A forest glade. I came out of the forest and stopped beneath a birch. The marvellous things that were happening here! The firs, crowding ever thicker together, stopped abruptly on the edge of the glade. And on the opposite side there were firs also and there, too, they had stopped, not daring to move further ahead. And so all round the glade thronged tall firs with

birches in front of them as a vanguard. The whole glade was covered with small green humps. The moles had been burrowing there once, and since then the humps had become overgrown with moss. A seed fell on the earth ploughed up by a mole, a birch struck root and then a shade-loving fir grew up underneath, protected from frost and sun by its motherly wing. And that is how the tall firs, not daring to send out their own young offspring openly to invade the glade, sent them out under cover of the birches, and under their protection advanced from all sides.

The required number of years will pass and the whole glade will become overgrown with firs alone, while the birches who had given them protection will wither in the shade.

FOREST DWELLINGS

We found an aspen with a woodpecker's old nest in which a pair of starlings now made their home. And we saw another old square hole, obviously a large, black woodpecker's, and a long narrow slit from which a tiny grey titmit hopped out.

On the firs we found two squirrel nests, but all we could make out from below were dark tangles of twigs. Both the nests were built on trees of a medium height which made the middle storey, so to say, in that vast forest. We saw one of the squirrels who lived there at the foot of

the tree and chased it high up the trunk. The squirrel, I must say, was still wearing its winter coat.

There were buzzards wheeling above the tree-tops where they obviously had their nest. And a raven flew in huge circles round his nest, guarding it with raucous cries.

A grey-hen flew past with amazing speed, happily thwarting the swoop of the hawk. Disappointed that he had missed his prey, the hawk came and sat on a branch. He had a white head, so he was probably a gerfalcon or a falcon.

Looking for the woodpeckers' tree holes is like looking for mushrooms:you have to strain your eyes all the time, peering at the ground in front and around you, although the tree holes are high up in the trunks, of course. What you are looking for is the pale wood dust which the woodpeckers drop on the dark ground, still bare of grass, when they start drilling the bark. From this dust you recognize the woodpecker's tree. It appears that choosing the right tree is not as simple as it looks, because you can see other holes which had been started and dropped not far from the finished job. It's a remarkable thing that the vast majority of the tree holes we found were drilled under a fungus on an aspen. Whether the fungus indicated that this was a nice, soft place easy to drill, or whether the birds chose it because the fungus would keep the rain out of the nest, we could not decide.

There were curious holes near the top of a rotting birch, not a very tall tree—about four

[illegible] high. One hole was near the top, and [illegible] one was a little lower, under a fungus. [illegible] crown had dropped off and lay beside the [illegible] and was saturated with water. The trunk [illegible] was not very secure, a push would send it [illegible]. It may be, of course, that those holes [illegible] not been drilled for nests.

WIND IN THE FOREST

It was windy, cool and clear. There was a [illegible] and rustling in the forest, and yet we [illegible] hear the bright summery song of a kinglet. It is only the top branches that thrash in the [illegible]; lower down there is only the sound of [illegible] leaves trembling and knocking against one [illegible]. While down below, in the grass, it is [illegible] quiet, save for the buzzing of a bumble-[illegible].

DROUGHT

The great drought continued. Our small river [illegible] run completely dry, the trees, once up-[illegible] by the water, still bridge the river, the [illegible] on the bank along which people went [illegible]-shooting is still there, as are also the fresh [illegible] made in the sand by birds and beasts [illegible] here, from force of habit, to drink. They [illegible] find some water to drink in the puddles here [illegible] there.

THE TURTLE-DOVE

The peaceful sound of a turtle-dove's cooing informs all the inhabitants of the forest that life goes on.

THE YEAR IS ON THE WANE

For everybody this is only the beginning of summer, but with us here the year is already on the wane. The days are growing ever shorter, and if the rye has flowered you know when it is going to be reaped.

On the forest edge, the birches look dazzlingly white in the slanting rays of the morning sun, whiter than marble columns. Here, under the birches, the buckthorn still puts out its amazing flowers; the fruit did not set well on the rowans, I'm afraid, but then the raspberries are good, and currants are covered with large green berries and are very lush this year.

With every day now the calls of the cuckoo in the forest are fewer and farther between, and the contented summer silence grows ever deeper with only the parents and their offspring calling to one another. A woodpecker's drumming is so rare that you start at the sound wondering who it can be? The forest symphony is no more, and even if you do hear a thrush, he is singing his lovely song all alone. Perhaps the song does sound even better now, because, after all, the best time is still ahead, this is only

the very beginning of summer. But be that as it may, something is past and over, and the year is on the wane.

THE ASPENS FEEL COLD

On a sunny day in autumn the young aspens huddling together on the edge of a fir forest look as if they had come out to bask in the sun, chilled as they were in the thicknesses, and they make me think of our villagers, sitting in front of their cottages, warming their bones in the sun.

AUTUMN DEW

Autumn was in the air. Sparrows were flocking together. Rooks walked about the reaped fields. Magpies fed on the roads in whole families. Dewdrops were cold and dull. And sometimes a drop would stay in the fold of a leaf all day.

AUTUMN

A granary smell hangs over the village.
Flails start drumming at dawn.
Mushrooms galore.

FALLING LEAVES

A hare emerged from the fir thickets and stopped, confronted by a large glade. It did not venture to go straight across and thought it safer to go around it, leaping from one birch to the next. Suddenly it stopped and listened. Anyone who feels creepy in the forest should stay away while the leaves are falling and whispering. The hare listened: someone seemed to be whispering behind and moving stealthily. Of course, even a cowardly hare could work up enough courage not to glance behind it all the time, but supposing it did not let the sound of the falling leaves frighten it, and just when it was off guard someone stole up from behind and seized it with its teeth?

AUTUMN

When I came here the rye was turning yellow. Now that it's time for me to leave, people are already eating new rye bread and the fields are sprouting again. When I came here the trees in the forest merged into a mass of green, and now each tree stands apart. It's autumn's way: it does not disrobe all the trees at once, but allows each one a little time to stand apart in its beautiful finery for all to admire.

DEW

Mist had risen from the fields, from the meadows and the waters, and dissolved in the blue, but in the forest there was no quick escape for it. The sun rose higher, through the mist the sunrays penetrated to the heart of the thickets, and there you could look directly at them.

The green paths in the forest seemed wreathed in smoke, everywhere the mist was rising and settling in tiny bubbles of moisture on leaves, on pine needles, on spider webs, on the telegraph wires. And as the sun rose higher and the air grew warmer, the bubbles on the telegraph wires ran together and thinned out. The same thing was happening on the trees, I suppose: there, too, the drops ran together.

When at last the sun became really hot, large drops of water with rainbow glints in them started falling on the ground from the telegraph wires. And it was the same in the forest, it was not raining, it was the trees weeping tears of joy, and the aspen more tremulously than any other. A falling drop stirred a sensitive leaf, the trembling communicated itself to leaves lower and lower down, until the whole tree was shaking in every leaf from the dripping, although there was not a puff of wind.

By now some of the spider webs had dried, and the spiders started tightening up the threads. A woodpecker got going on a fir, and a thrush went pecking at some rowan berries.

A WINDY DAY

This fresh wind has a way of speaking softly to the hunter, and the hunters themselves often burst into talk from the fullness of their joyful expectations. You can either talk or keep silent: with hunters both talk and silence are light. A hunter would be in the middle of some jolly story, and suddenly something would flicker past in the air, he'd look that way and then ask: "Where was I?" And if he did not remember, never mind, he could start on something else. It is the same with the wind in a hunting autumn: it would be whispering something all the time, leaving one thing unfinished and going on to something else: hear the muttering of that young blackcock? It's stopped now... Hear the cries of the cranes?

SPROUTS

The double sky, that is when the clouds move in different directions, resulted in rain pouring for two whole days, and when the rain ended, icy clouds appeared. But the sun shone bright in the morning, and I hurried off with my camera, taking no notice of the conspiracy brewing in the sky.

The rye was sprouting. The shoots looked like toy soldiers all dressed in red with green bayonets, and from the tip of every bayonet hung a huge drop sparkling like a diamond in the sun. When I trained my camera on the

field and saw the picture it would make of an army in red tunics with green bayonets and each soldier carrying a shining sun of his own, my elation knew no bounds. I flopped down on my stomach into the mud, and fiddled with my camera to get the picture right.

Alas, it could not be done with the means I had. The red tunics would come out dark, blending with the ground, and only the nearest dewdrops would show. But at least I had seen it all, as I lay in the mud on my stomach.

THE LAST FLOWERS

The night had been frosty again. Out in the open in the morning I saw some bluebells which had survived, and a bumble-bee sitting on one of the flowers. I picked the bluebell, the bumble-bee did not stir and fell down when I brushed it off. I laid it down on a sun spot, it revived, and flew away. And on another sat a petrified red dragonfly, and then, before my very eyes, it revived in the sun and flitted away. And now grasshoppers spilled over the grass from under my feet, there were scores and scores of them, blue and bright red ones among them, the kind that flew up with a whir.

THE WEIGHT-LIFTER

Red bilberry overran the ground loosened by the ants' efforts, and a mushroom was born

under the berries. It grew big and strong and little by little, pushing with its solid cap, it lifted the obstruction, and stood there under the vault for all to see, perfectly white.

BIRCHES

In winter the birches keep out of sight in a coniferous forest, and in spring, when their leaves open out, they seem to step forward into the light. This illusion lasts until the leaves turn dark and blend more or less with the colour of the conifers. And then, in autumn, before they retreat into hiding once more, they appear to us in all their golden glory.

THE HAT ON THE THIEF HAS CAUGHT FIRE!

All was still and golden and hoarfrost lay on the ground like linens, it was a real frost, not cold dew. It was not till eight o'clock in the morning that this visible, real frost dissolved in dew and the linens under the birches vanished. Moisture was dripping from leaves everywhere. In the distance, the firs and the pines were saying goodbye to the birches, and the tall aspens towered over the forest; their red crowns aglow, and for some unknown reason I remembered the saying which I could never understand as a child: "The cap on the thief has caught fire! "

The swallows were still here.

THE PARACHUTE

In a silence so utter that it made your ears ring, a yellow leaf slowly drifted down from a birch, hemmed in by tall firs. It was so still that even the aspen leaves did not stir, and yet it came drifting down. Everyone was puzzled, and all the firs, birches and pines with all their leaves and needles, even the bushes, and even the grass under the bushes marvelled and asked: "How could it have broken off in this stillness and go drifting down?" Since everyone wanted to know, I went and asked the leaf. It transpired that a spider had pulled it off with its weight and used it for a parachute to descend to the ground.

THE ROWANS ARE TURNING RED

Little dew fell that morning. And in the clearings there was no gossamer at all. I could hear the woodpecker, the jay and the thrush. The rowans were turning a bright red, and the birch leaves were turning yellow. Little white butterflies, no larger than moths, flitted over the brown grass from time to time.

OUR POOL

Among the charred trees which had survived last year's forest fire there was this aspen on the very edge of the high cliff over our pool. In the

summer a hayrick had been built beside this tree and now, in the autumn, the hay had turned a dirty yellow and the aspen a flaming red. You can see both the hayrick and the aspen from afar and they show the way to our pool where the sheat-fish are as many as people in a large town and where, of a morning, the *shelesper*, a terrible predator, pounces on a shoal of small fishes and beats the water so hard with its tail that the fishes turn belly-up and the enemy devours the lot.

There is such a lot of small fry in our pool that if you slap the water with your oar a whole shoal of them will be tossed up into the air. Angling can be disappointing now, and all the sheat-fish can be tempted with at night are frogs, but because of the drought there are few frogs this year, as few as spiders, and for another thing there are no spider webs at all in the auburn woods.

On the Kubra, in spite of the cold, you can still see some water lilies, and whole patches of little white flowers like strawberry blossoms.

The graceful stalks of the white water lilies, lying on green saucer-like leaves, can be seen a long way down in the clear water, teasing your imagination.

THE FIRST FROST

The moon hung large and clear all night, and towards morning the ground became grey from

hoarfrost, though the puddles did not freeze over. When the sun came out and shed its warmth generously over everything, the trees and grasses became drenched in dew, and the firs at the edge of the dark forest sparkled so gloriously that they may have been hung with all the diamonds in the world.

There was one tall pine, bejewelled like a queen, that was especially beautiful. My heart leapt from joy like a young puppy.

SQUIRRELS

At the first dawning of light, we left the house one by one, going our different ways to the fir coppice after squirrels. The sky was heavy and so low that it seemed that only the firs were holding it up. Many of the green tree-tops looked quite red from cones, and if there were plenty of cones there would be plenty of squirrels too.

Where I went some of the firs looked as if they had been carefully combed from top to bottom, some were young and curly, and some were very old with long green-grey lichen beards. There was one old tree which looked quite dead from the ground up with a long grey beard hanging from each branch, but in the top branches there were enough cones to fill a barn. Suddenly a twig quivered. But the squirrel had noticed me and grew still. The old tree under which I stood waiting was charred on one side

and it seemed to grow from a large hollow, packed with the fallen leaves of a nearby birches. I raked away the dead leaves. The earth underneath was black and covered with ashes. I understood what must have happened. Last winter a hunter was tracking a marten which must have leapt from one tree to another, dropping bits of bark and leaving its prints on the snow-laden branches. Excited by his chase after this valuable animal, the hunter had not noticed the gathering dusk and was obliged to stay the night there. Under the tree where I now stood was a huge ant-hill, probably the biggest ant kingdom in this forest. The hunter swept the snow off it, set fire to it and burnt that whole kingdom down. After that he lay down in the warm ashes, covered himself with his coat, raking more ashes on top of it, went to sleep, and in the morning continued his chase.

In the spring, the hollow where the ant-hill once rose filled with water. In the autumn the birches shed their leaves into it, and squirrels dropped the chips of the cones they husked. And here I was, come after the squirrels' pelts.

While waiting for the squirrel I very much wanted to use the time to write something in my note-book about this ant-hill, and with the slowest and stealthiest of movements I got pencil and note-book out of my bag. I wrote that in the forest world this ant-hill was a kingdom as vast as China was in our human world. And suddenly a chip of a fir cone fell on the page. So the squirrel was right there above me. When I

first came it had grown perfectly still, but its curiosity had gotten the better of it and it had to find out if I were alive or had really turned into a tree and was no longer dangerous. The squirrel may have dropped that chip on me on purpose, and after a moment dropped two more in succession. Devoured by curiosity it would not go away now until it had ascertained what I was. I went on writing about the great ant kingdom which had taken great pains to build up, and how it was destroyed by a giant for the sake of a single night's warm bed. At that moment the squirrel threw a whole cone at me and almost knocked the note-book out of my hands. Out of the corner of my eye I watched it cautiously climbing down from one branch to the next, coming closer and closer to me until the foolish little thing could look right over my shoulder at my lines about the giant who had destroyed a whole kingdom for one night's sleep.

Something like this had happened before: I fired at one squirrel, and three others were startled into betraying their presence by each dropping a cone.

That's how we hunt squirrels in our Moscow "taiga" in November: from dawn until eleven, and then from two in the afternoon until dark. It is during these hours that the squirrels husk the cones, causing the branches to sway, drop chips and go running from one tree to the other in search of better food. From eleven until two we don't hunt, because at this time the

squirrels sit where the branches are thickest and wash their faces with their paws.

THE SHADOW OF MAN

There was a moon at dawn. Clouds blanketed the eastern sky. At last, a streak of light appeared from under this blanket and the moon now floated in a pale blue.

The mist was breaking up so strangely and angrily that it left the lake looking as if it were covered with ice floes. The village roosters and swans cried welcome to the dawn.

I am a poor musician, but I think that the swans' top notes are those of the cranes when they scream for light on the swamps in the morning, while their lowest notes are those of the gabbling geese.

I don't know if it was because of the moon or the rosy glow on the blue around it but I did not notice the rooks at once, and very soon the sky was literally swarming with rooks and jackdaws, the rooks manoeuvring before departure and the jackdaws as usual seeing them off. I really would like to know why the jackdaws always see the rooks off. There was a time when I thought that everything in the world was known and that only I, poor ignoramus, didn't know anything, and then it transpired that very often scholars do not know the simplest thing about living nature.

For instance, it was only recently that we

found out that some of our crows were birds of passage. Then why could not some of the jackdaws also fly off together with the rooks?

A morning breeze started up and toppled the small fir I had stuck in the middle of the field in order to steal up closer to the geese. I went and set it up again, and the next moment the geese appeared. I crawled around the tree, keeping out of their sight, but they had their suspicions about this fir and after circling over it two or three times flew off and settled near Dubovitsi. There was a big willow bush in the middle of the field and, using it for cover, I crept up on them. The stubble field was covered with white hoarfrost and for a long time I did not notice that my shadow came ahead of me, and then I was horrified to see that this huge, frightening black shadow of mine had nearly reached the geese. The terrifying black human shadow on the white hoarfrost twitched, a commotion ensued among the geese and suddenly the whole flock, two hundred strong, went straight for my bush, each screaming voice as loud as a soldier's in an infantry attack. I just managed to jump into the bush and thrust out my double-barreled gun to meet the assault.

THE BADGER

At this time last year the ground was already covered with snow, but this year autumn had

lingered and the white hares could be seen a long way off on the black ground. They really had it worse than anyone else. No, the grey badger had nothing to fear. They were still about, I thought, one fatter than the other. I decided to ambush one near its burrow. At this gloomy time of year in the quiet of the fir forest, where our indoor evaluation of the seasons as jolly or dull are quite invalid, everything is in constant movement with a purpose and joy of its own. The sides of the gully where the badgers live are so steep that as you clamber up you often leave a print of a whole hand next to the badger's tracks. I squatted beside an old fir tree to watch the main burrow through the lower branches. A squirrel, lining its nest with moss, dropped a few bits of it, and after that came the silence which a hunter can listen to for hours, never noticing the time pass as he sits watching for a badger.

There is nothing to indicate the movement of the sun in the heavy skies, propped up by the dense fir forest, but when the sun goes down the badger knows it in his dark burrow and a little later ventures out for his nocturnal hunt. He pokes his nose out, snorts and hides again, and then jumps out with such extraordinary alacrity that the hunter is left gaping. So it is far better to wait until just before dawn for the badger to return—it comes straight on then and its rustling can be heard from afar.

But ordinarily the badger would be hibernating now and not venturing out every day, and

t would be a pity if I wasted this whole night squatting here and the whole of the next day sleeping it off.

It was not like sitting in an arm-chair, of course, my legs grew numb, but suddenly the badger poked out its nose and I never felt more comfortable! It poked out its nose again, and nodded, poked it out again half an hour later, hesitated and disappeared for good. And that was that.

It began to snow before even I had reached the forester's hut. Could the badger have sensed it coming by merely poking out its nose?

THE POWER OF BEAUTY

Boris Ivanovich, my artist-friend, stole up to the swans in the mist and took aim, but then deciding that he'd get more with small shot he reloaded his gun with duck-shot. And just as he was about to fire, he fancied that it was human beings, not swans, that he wanted to kill. He lowered his gun, stood gazing in admiration at the beautiful birds for some time, and then stole away so quietly that the swans never knew that their lives had been in danger.

I have heard people say that swans are wicked birds. they cannot tolerate the proximity of geese and ducks and often kill them. Is it true? However, even if it is true, it cannot impair our poetic notion that a spell has turned a lovely girl into a swan, for such is the power of beauty.

IVAN-AND-MARIA

Late autumn is very often like early spring—patches of white snow, and patches of black ground. Except that in spring the melted ground smells of earth and in autumn—of snow. It's always like that: in the course of winter we become used to the snow and in spring we are keenly aware of the smell of earth, but during summer we become so accustomed to it that in late autumn we are more sensitive to the smell of snow.

The sun comes out rarely now, and then only for an hour, but how welcome it is! Our heart goes out then to a tiny blue flower on the ground or a few frozen leaves still clinging to a willow in spite of the winds. I bent down to look at the tiny blue flower and to my amazement recognised Ivan, the surviving half of the cow-wheat which we call Ivan-and-Maria.

To tell the truth, Ivan is not a real flower. It is made up of tiny curly leaves and only because they are mauve it is called a flower. The real flower with pistil and stamens is the yellow Maria. It's Maria that has shed the seeds on the ground that autumn, she laboured much harder than Ivan and that's why she died earlier, I suppose. But what I liked in Ivan was that he had borne up under the cold and even turned that pretty blue colour.

I said farewell to this late autumn flower, and whispered:

"Ah Ivan, Ivan, where is your Maria now! "

THE MIST

The night was starry and amazingly warm. I went outside in the pre-dawn hour, and I heard only one single drop falling on the ground from the roof. At daybreak the mist began to swirl and we found ourselves on the shore of a boundless sea.

The most precious and mysterious time of the day is between first light and sunrise when the intricate shapes of the leafless trees only begin to emerge. The birches seemed to have been brushed downward, and the maples and aspens upward. I witnessed the birth of the hoarfrost, I saw it drying and whitening the old yellow grass and glazing the puddles with the thinnest film of ice.

When the sun rose the outline of the opposite shore appeared in the clouds and hung high in the air. The lake also emerged from the mist at last. In the sun-shot mist everything was magnified: a long string of mallard was like an advancing army, and a flock of swans was like a white fairy-tale city rising from the sea.

A black-grouse appeared, flying from the roost and obviously on some urgent business, because another one came flying in the same direction, and then more and more of them. When I reached the swamp I found a large flock already gathered there, a few perching on trees but the majority running about the hummocks, hopping and muttering just as if this were spring.

You could tell it was not spring only because

the winter rye was such a very bright green, and also because young wine was not fermenting in you and joy did not stab at your heart. Your joy was serene now, as if something had stopped aching, you were glad that the pain was gone but sad too, when you came to think of it: it was life itself that had passed, not just the pain.

During this long spell of cold weather the utterly black lake had become encircled with a ring of ice, and with every day the ring of ice had narrowed and narrowed, hemming in the black water more and more. And now the ring broke up, and the liberated water sparkled and rejoiced. Streams, as noisy as in spring, rushed down the hillsides. But when the clouds hid the sun again, we discovered that we would not have seen the water, the advancing army and the fairy-tale city if it had not been for the sunrays piercing the mist. And now the mist hid everything from view once again, even the lake disappeared and all that remained was the outline of the opposite shore, hovering high in the sky.

GEESE AND SWANS

It had been a clear, very cold night, both starlit and moonlit. In the morning everything was white with snow. The geese were feeding where they usually did. A new caravan joined them, and now about two hundred of them went flying from the lake to the field. Till

midday the black-grouse remained muttering in the trees. And then the sky became clouded over and the day turned raw and cold.

In the afternoon the sun came out again and everything was fine until evening. We rejoiced in our two golden birches which had survived the holocaust. But the wind came from the north, and the lake looked black and angry. A whole caravan of swans arrived. Swans do not stay here with us very long; when only a small circle in the middle of the lake remains unfrozen and carts can already be driven straight across the ice, you can hear someone talking there, in the dark and silence of the night, and you think it's people, but in fact it's the swans in that unfrozen patch of water.

In the evening I stole up so close to the geese from the gully that I could have routed the lot, but the climb tired me, my heart was hammering, and I wanted to idle for a bit. There was a stump near the edge of the gully, I sat down on it for a rest. I only had to lift my head, and there was the rye field with the geese, not ten paces away. I had my gun ready, and I was certain that even if they took flight suddenly they would not escape me without heavy losses. I lit a cigarette, careful to dispel to smoke with my hand as I exhaled it. Now, there was another gully beyond that field, and a fox stole up on the geese from there, just as I had done myself. Before I could raise my gun, the whole flock took off and was out of range. Luckily I guessed it was a fox that had given the geese such a

fright and did not stick my head out. The fox followed the tracks of the geese like a dog, and came closer and closer. I took aim, whistled softly like a field mouse, the fox looked my way, I whistled once more, and on it came.

LATE AUTUMN

Autumn goes on like a narrow road with sharp twists and turns. There's frost one day, rain the next, or else a proper winter snowstorm, howling and whirling, and then it's sunny and warm again, and everything turns green. There, at the very end of the grove, stands a birch tree with golden leaves: it will remain just as it was when the frost struck it, the wind will not be able to tear its remaining leaves off, it has already done its worst.

The latest autumn is when the rowan berries wrinkle up from the frost and become "sweet". A late autumn like this is so like early spring that you only know the difference from the way your thoughts run. In the autumn you tell yourself: "If I live through this winter I'll rejoice in one more spring."

I suppose that's how everything must be in life: you have to do without, strain for something, and then you can rejoice in achieving it. Ivan Krylov's fable "The Dragonfly and the Ant" came to mind, and the ant's stern speech: "Oh, you spent the summer singing, go and do some dancing now! " In early spring, on a day

exactly like this one, you expect joy without doing anything to deserve it: you wouldn't worry about the ant's sermon if you were a dragonfly, you'd simply flit away.

THE SMALL SWIFT STREAM

Here's that small glade between the two streams where I picked mushrooms the other day. It's all white now; every stump is covered with white, and even the rowan berries have been powdered with rime. The larger and calmer of the two streams has frozen over, but the small, swift one is still putting up a struggle for its freedom.

TREES IN THE FOREST

Snowfall. It is very quiet and warm in the forest with the snow all but melting. The trees stand in snow, the branches of the firs droop under the weight of snow, the birches have bent down, the crowns of some of them touching the ground to form lacy arches. It's the same with trees as with people: a fir might snap across and die but never bend, not under any weight, while a birch will bend under the lightest burden. The fir stands regally erect, while the birch weeps.

In the snowy silence of the forest the trees make such eloquent figures that you wonder

why they don't say something to each other, or does my presence make them shy? But when the snow started falling, you fancied that the soft swish you were hearing was really their whispered conversation.

A CRYSTAL-CLEAR DAY

The hare-hunting season was over. There were double tracks in the snow now, where hare chased hare. From dawn to dusk the days sparkled like crystal. At noon the sun was quite hot, a light breeze stirred the branches, the snow figurines fell and turned to powder in falling, and this powder was swept aloft again, sparkling in the sun.

More and ever more snow was collected in the top whorl of the tallest fir tree as in a vase, until the snow hid from view even the long, straight finger on which a little bird alights at sundown in spring and sings its pretty song.

BADGERS

In the winter, round Christmas, I went to the water meadow for hay, shovelled the hay with my pitchfork and discovered that a badger was hibernating there.

Also about this time, the village boys went on a badger hunt. They let a dog down into a burrow. The she-badger came out. When the boys

saw that she could not run very fast, they dropped their guns and started chasing it. Catch her they did, but they had dropped their guns, they had no sticks, and trying to seize her with their bare hands was rather scary. In the meantime the she-badger discovered a new passage leading underground, and that was the last they saw of her. The dog pulled out the nest with a baby badger in it: quite a big one, the size of a decent pup.

THE SQUIRREL'S MEMORY

I was thinking about squirrels. Naturally, if the squirrel had a large store it remembered where it was, but we saw from its tracks that here it had dug through the snow to the moss where in the autumn it had hidden two nuts, ate them there and then, ran for another ten metres or so, dived in again, left the shells of two or three nuts on the snow, made another short run and stopped to eat again. It is hardly likely that the squirrel had discovered the nuts through a layer of melting snow and frozen moss by smell. So it must have remembered where it had hidden them in the moss so many centimetres from the fir. And it did not have to measure the distance either: it knew exactly where the nuts were, dived in and got them.

THE NEW MOON

The sky was clear. The sunrise was gorgeous in the stillness. The frost was 12°C below zero.

There was a golden light in the forest all day, and when sundown came the glow spread across half the sky. It was a northern glow, a sparkling raspberry red, the colour of the shiny transparent paper from which Christmas crackers were made. But in the sky it was not all red, in the middle of it ran a deep-blue lancet-shaped streak, as though it marked the passage of a zeppelin, and along the edges there were lines of various hues in the subtlest shadings, complementing the main colours.

The sunset glow lasts at its fullest for fifteen minutes or so. The new moon hung in the blue sky facing the red glow, and it had a surprised look as if it had never seen anything like this before.

NIGHTINGALES

Stories About the Children of Leningrad

BOTIK

Botik, where Tsar Peter the Great's boat—one of the ancestors of the Russian fleet—is kept, is located on a beautiful hill on the shore of Lake Pleshcheyevo, not far from Pereslavl-Zalessky, an ancient Russian town. On quiet summer days one can see mirrored in the still waters of the lake, the old churches on the opposite shore, the remains of ancient settlements on the hills, and 11th century cathedral, and much else which Peter himself, with his St. Petersburg, regarded as ancient history.

In the environments of Moscow there are few places more beautiful than Botik: at the foot of the hill lies the perfectly transparent oval lake, measuring six by nine versts, with a wonderful beach; on the right of it the ancient town rises from the mist like a vision, and on the left begin the forests, not suburban but really wild

forests with elks and bears, and continuing northwards with hardly a break in them.

Twenty years ago we lived here in perfect solitude in a white palace among ancient birches, said to have been planted in the days of Catherine the Great. It was only once a year, on St. Peter's day (July 12) when all the grasses came into full bloom that the Pereslavl inhabitants gathered in multitudes to honour the memory of Tsar Peter. To the few chance visitors who came at other times we demonstrated the monument to Peter the Great erected by the nobility of Vladimir in 1852. Inscribed in letters of gold on gray marble is the tsar's wrathful ukase threatening dire retribution to the descendants of the Pereslavl voivodes if they did not safeguard the remains of his "play" fleet. The look of that boat with the rotten ropes—the only sorry survivor of Peter's many galleys and frigates—always left a painful impression on us after we'd read the wrathful ukase.

The constant urge to swiftly go ahead was part of Tsar Peter's nature, and this has been perfectly understood by both Falconet and Pushkin who created for us the image of a giant on a bronze horse. After that monument, the wretched inadequacy of the marble paper-weight in Botik was quite unbearable. And so we decided to erect a memorial here, to the best of our ability, purely in the spirit of Tsar Peter, and set up a geographic station in the beautiful white stone house.

I remember that one of the scientists work-

ing here suggested that the experiments should be planned for no more than five years or so because by that time the shores of this most beautiful lake in Central Russia would be densely built up with holiday homes and summer residences.

This forecast did not come true. The shores of Lake Pleshcheyevo are as desolate as ever. After the geographic station, the building was used for a short-lived biological station, then as a holiday home, then a technical school, and other institutions which in turn shouldered out one another.

A year ago, during the Leningrad blockade, the house received the evacuated children whose mothers had died of hunger in the besieged city, sacrificing everything to keep their children alive. Terribly emaciated the boys and girls were skin and bones, but living in this healthy natural environment benefited them greatly, and by the time the nightingales began to sing the children recuperated and were running about, chirping merrily.

It was then that the past of Peter's play fleet and the presence of his boat became linked up with the present, and it was as if Peter himself was glad to have the children there and rescinded his stern ukase.

CHILDREN

When we first came to Botik twenty years ago and made our tentative acquaintance with the

countryside, we discovered that deep inside we were children who delighted in procuring their food with a gun in the forest and with a fishing net in the lake. There was an elderly artist with us, a perfect child at heart; watching him, the thought occurred that perhaps every true artist cherishes the child in himself like a loving mother and educates him like a sensible father. Thanks to this artist we ourselves fell into the mood of children and went into raptures over the scenery.

What wonderful stars shone over Botik!

And now we came here, anguished not by our own personal grief but by the terrible disaster that had befallen all mankind on earth, a common grief that shattered people's private lives.

And there they shone over Botik again, those same, large, radiantly sparkling stars. But how cold they had become, how utterly indifferent to human grief! The sight of these vapid stars made it very painful for us to part with all that was best in our past: we no longer saw any magic in those safely unchangeable ornaments of the sky.

But, of course, these were only our intimate poetic notions, we could not really make any demands on the stars, and they disappointed us so much simply because we were no longer simple like children. But then afterwards, when the children came running to us, we recognised the magic of our own childhood shining in their eyes, and it was as though the stars had sent it

own. We welcomed this recognition joyously, because the best in us seemed to be distributed among their brown, blue, black, and gray, innocent eyes.

We took the children by the hand, we picked them up in our arms, we let each one of them touch our clothes and listened very attentively to their chirping and babbling.

These Leningrad children, who had never before lived in such close contact with wild life, told us first of all about the very quick gray hare they had seen.

"He had a huge tail! " a voice called out from the crowd.

"Couldn't be," we replied. "The hare's tail is a small white puff, and hunters call it a flower."

"That's not true! " the same voice shouted. "Maybe that's what all the other hares have, but *our* hare had a great big tail, we all saw it! "

They also told us about the kitten who climbed into a crow's nest and the crow pecked one of his eyes out.

"Look, there he comes, that one-eyed kitten! "

"Oh, poor thing! "

"He's not poor at all, serves him right for getting into birds' nests."

They now told us about the frog: it had been hopping along, they caught it, squeezed it a bit when it tried to get away, and after that it did not hop any more.

"Oh, for shame, squashing that poor frog, and maybe it was the charmed princess herself! "

We recounted for them, as well as we remembered it, the fairy-tale about the princess changed into a frog, and apparently it did not come out badly, because all the children were touched, they felt sorry for the charmed princess and promised never to molest frogs again.

"Let them hop all they want! "

"Frogs we'll leave alone, but what if a bear comes?" asked one little boy.

"There aren't any bears near here, the bear won't come."

"It won't? But a bear did come here last night. I heard him myself: suddenly the door opened and a great big bear came in, he made straight for me, and I started yelling at the top of my voice. The nannies came running and the bear ran away."

"You mustn't be afraid of bears," we told him. "Bears are scared of people."

And we described for them what really happened to us in the North once, when for a whole month we had been seeking an encounter with a bear in the taiga, and finally gave it up. But when we got into our boat and pushed off, the bear came out of the forest and watched us for a long time as we sailed down the river.

"But why didn't you shoot him?"

"We didn't see him."

"But then how did you know that he was watching you?"

"Another hunter told us afterwards that he saw him from his shed on the other bank of the river.

"That same hunter also told us that when we had disappeared round the bend in the river, the bear climbed up a very tall tree and again watched us from there for a long time. Finally, he gave us a wave with his paw, stuck out his tongue at us, got down from the tree and ran off into the forest."

We were sitting on a broad tree stump, as we told them this story, and the children were clinging close to us, the way the numerous offspring of a tree throng round the mother-stump. All the children looked neat and clean and well cared for, they were in good health now, and had rosy, tanned faces. But somehow it was pathetic how very close they clung to us, how strongly they were drawn to us. It happens like that in the forest: a tree is cut down, the potency of the roots pushes out clusters of young offspring, but the tiny leaves on them are much too green, the bark too tender, the stalks too closely clustered together, embracing empty space: there is no mother-tree any more, only the stump.

One of these offspring was a little girl called Teresa, she was the daughter of a Spanish woman, a member of the Komsomol, who had died in Leningrad. This proud, unsociable little girl asked us, dropping her eyes shyly, if we would let her call us Mummy and Daddy. After Teresa all the other children naturally asked us the same thing.

We were there, where the mother-tree had died, and these human offspring were asking us:

"You *are* our Daddy and Mummy, aren't you?"

What could we tell them? When you see those tiny creatures, those four- or five-year olds, appealing to you with the question: "You *are* our Daddy and Mummy, aren't you?" it leaves you shaken, and all at once you clearly understand the word "Motherland", which, from too frequent repetition, has lost its primary meaning.

DADDY-DOCTOR

The doctor was the only male in that female kingdom, and he had a family of about three hundred people to attend to. A little boy, Misha, was brought to him with a skin disease—a consequence of his starving in Leningrad. A minor operation was indicated.

The child blanched while the doctor prepared the instrument.

"Don't be afraid, son, I want to help you. You won't be afraid, will you?"

"I won't."

"Here we go then. Hold tight."

"I am holding tight."

"Does it hurt?"

"I don't want it to hurt. I'm holding on."

"Good boy! Well, that's all! "

Misha was happy. Misha was enchanted with this kind doctor who had roused in him the courage to bear up under pain. And a feeling of gratitude swelled in his innocent, shy heart.

Flushing, Misha asked in a timid, faltering voice:

"Doctor, may I call you Daddy?"

"Why, don't you have a Daddy?"

"My Daddy's far, he's at the front. That's why Daddy, and here you'll be *our* Daddy."

The doctor consented on condition that Misha promised to keep their pact a secret.

That evening, when the doctor was making the rounds, all the children in the dormitory shouted together:

"Our Daddy's coming! "

The doctor was not pleased with this new appointment of his. He was a businesslike man, it was up to him to instill discipline in the children, he was their doctor and not their Daddy. And so he forbade them to call him that, and the boy Misha too, for not keeping his promise.

"You're a tattler," he told him, and, turning to us, grumbled: "Try to understand the wisdom of this: 'Be like children! ' when all children are cheats and rascals."

When he was free, however, the doctor made a kite for the children, using his penknife, and flew it together with them. Thereupon, the children forgot his forbiddal and again called him Daddy, and the doctor seemed to be as happy as a child.

We went up to him as he was flying the kite, and repeated his words: "Try to understand the wisdom of this: 'Be like children! ' "

ADOPTION

Agrafena Ivanovna, a good, kind-hearted woman started coming to Botik from Berendeyevo where she worked as a cook. She never came to visit the children empty-handed, and she always looked neat and tidy, which children appreciate very much. Agrafena Ivanovna had no children, and all her motherly care was lavished on her husband, but he went to the war and was reported missing. She wept for him, people consoled her: after all, she wasn't the only war widow in the world, and grief was easier to bear in company with others.

This childless widow became very fond of one girl in the children's home. This was Valya, a small, thin little girl with a wide-eyed look, like a young doe. Agrafena Ivanovna started taking Valya for walks, told her fairy tales, took comfort in her as in a daughter, and little by little began to toy with the idea of adopting her for good. Fortunately for Agrafena Ivanovna, all memory of Leningrad was completely erased from little Valya's mind after her illness: she did not remember her home there, or what her mother and father were like. The whole staff of the children's home assured Agrafena Ivanovna that Valya never once remembered anything from her past life.

"Look at her face: it's as if she is marvelling at something, listening hard, or trying to remember. She is sure that you are her real mother. Take her, and you'll be happy."

"That's what I'm afraid of: her trying to remember something. Supposing I do take her and suddenly she remembers—what then?"

She gave the matter serious thought, weighed everything up, and quite decided to adopt Valya to be a comfort to her in her old age, but when the formalities were already under way an obstacle arose quite unexpectedly. Everyone in the children's home believed that Valya's father had been killed in the war, and men returning from the front also said that he had died before their very eyes, but there was no official document certifying this. Therefore, according to the law, the child was not eligible for adoption.

"Take her anyway," people told Agrafena Ivanovna. "Provisionally, at least. When her father comes back you'll give her back to him, or maybe you'll marry the man! "

"How can you joke? I shall not marry anyone, and I'm afraid to take the child on those terms, I'll always be thinking that the day will come when she'll be taken away from me. No, thank you, if I take her it'll be for good, and this way what's the use."

After this conversation, Agrafena Ivanovna kept away from Botik for a whole month. But at home, of course, in her small yellow cottage in Berendeyevo, she cried her heart out for the little girl, missing her daughter terribly, and Valya, too, was quite inconsolable because her Mummy had abandoned her. Finally, Agrafena Ivanovna could not stand it any more, and went to the children's home,

bringing a large package of goodies for the children. There's no describing the reunion. And again everyone tried to persuade Agrafena Ivanovna to take the child provisionally, and again Agrafena Ivanovna stubbornly repeated:

"If I take her it'll be for good, and this way what's the use."

This went on for about two months, and then, in August, a document arrived, certifying the death of Valya's father, and Agrafena Ivanovna took her adopted daughter home with her to Berendeyevo.

Could anyone fall in love with that uncomely yellow little cottage with its three windows facing the mists of Berendeyevo bog, uglified by the peat workings? A stranger would see nothing endearing in it, but to Agrafena Ivanovna it was her beloved home: everything in the house had been made with the hands of her near and dear ones, here they had lived, here they came into the world and departed from it, and here they were remembered. Even a puppy, when parted with his mother and brought into a strange house, will stare about him with his dim blue eyes, whimpering a little from trying and failing to recognise something. And to Valya, an orphan, everything was a joy in that small yellow cottage. She wanted to touch everything, she was so happy as though she had really come home, to her real mother. Agrafena Ivanovna was delighted, and to make the paradise complete for the child, she put on the gramophone.

There is a gramophone in the children's home now, but in those days, when Valya was taken in, the children there had never seen or heard a record played. Valya could not know what it was, and besides she was only little more than a baby. But when the gramophone began to play she opened wide her eyes.

"Nightingale, my nightingale..." sang the gramophone.

Valya looked startled, she listened hard, and then began to look about her, recognising, remembering...

"But where's the cage?" she asked, out of the blue.

"What cage?"

"With the little bird. It used to hang over here."

Before Agrafena Ivanovna could reply, Valya went on:

"There was a small table here, and my dollies on it..."

"I'll bring them, in a minute," said Agrafena Ivanovna, and took a fine doll out of a wooden chest.

"That's not my doll, that's not my doll! "

And suddenly something flashed in Valya's eyes: in that fleeting moment she evidently remembered everything.

"Mummy! " she screamed. "You're not Mummy! " And burst into tears.

And the gramophone went on singing: "Nightingale, my nightingale..."

When the record came to an end and the

nightingale stopped singing, Agrafena Ivanovna also suddenly remembered some sorrow of her own; she broke into a wail, banged her head on the wall and then dropped it on the table. She raised her head, then dropped it again, moaning and sobbing. Her despair overpowered Valya's grief. The little girl hugged her, tugged at her and said over and over again:

"Mummy, Mummy darling, don't cry! I've remembered everything, but I love you too, you're my real Mummy now! "

And the two women, the big and the small one, hugged and understood each other like equals.

ROMANCE

When the boy was brought to the children's home, he was fully conscious and of his own volition gave a detailed account of how his mother died. This account was written down word for word in the children home's book. A few days after the boy fell ill with meningitis and was nursed day and night by Anna Mikhailovna. This ordinary woman with ordinary failings was truly beautiful then, as she fought for the boy's life, with no thought of rest or sleep. When the meningitis was conquered, a new battle began—against diphtheria, and when he recovered from diphtheria, the grave consequences of his hunger illness set in.

The doctor himself called Vova's recovery a

:ological miracle, and—miracle apart—the doing :f Anna Mikhailovna. It is difficult for us to :icture what the boy suffered during that battle :r his life. But we can easily guess that in his :ucid moments the image of his new Mummy superseded the old one, and little by little, as he got well, he left the old life and entered the new one, completely oblivious of all that had happened to him in those terrible days of the blockade.

It may be said that the Vova of before had died, and all that remained of him, like a memorial, was the account of his mother's death in the children home's book. The new Vova owed his emergence into the world to the strength of his new Mummy's love. She jealously guarded from him the secret of his painful past. And that was only natural: every mother, for all her happiness in her child, always has a secret anxiety for him in her heart, and some sorrows too.

At last Vova's father heard from people about the death of his wife and the rescue of their child; he was also told that some woman was selflessly nursing the boy and that he had completely forgotten the past.

"Vova, my darling boy," he wrote to his son. "How could you have forgotten that white path in the grass and how you and I were pulling your toy horse along that path, how you wanted to mount it and fell off, there were ants on that path, you got frightened and screamed, and so we left that ant-ridden path and moved to a clean one?"

Needless to say, Anna Mikhailovna suppressed this letter, and wrote to Vova's father that for his son's sake he should try and forget the past.

"I'm afraid I can't tell you how to *forget.* Perhaps you, the big Vova, will take little Vova as an example: he was ill, he recovered with me, and now he lives and loves me like he loved his real Mummy. I make bold to remind you that for the big Vova our Motherland, for which you are doing so much, is also a mother. Forgive me, it's hard for me to put in words what I feel: nightingales are in song here now, and I fancy that by singing they are also doing their bit. I can see one in front of my window just now: it has begun to rain, rain is already falling on him, but still he sings, one raindrop is already hanging from the tip of his bill, but he shakes it off and sings. He's doing it not just for himself alone, he's singing now and he'll sing next year, maybe it will be another nightingale but the song will be the same. And here am I, also doing my bit in place of Vova's real mother and the song I sing to him is the same; and there are you, doing what you must at the risk of your life. And all that added together means Motherland for which we all live: we seem to be living for ourselves, but actually it's for Motherland."

Thus wrote Anna Mikhailovna, unaware that she was doing for Vova's father what she had done for Vova himself. And he wrote to her more and more often as time went on. In his last letter he said:

"We have nightingales singing here too, only

now I never took any notice of them. ...er your letters I started hearing them: they ... sing, and the roar of our artillery does not ...rb them too much.

"I can now envision far behind our front lines ... our immediate rear the blessed land where, ... you so nicely put it, the nightingales are doing ...eir bit for us. I do understand it, and do not ... thank you, because thank you is not said for ...mething so lovely..."

On this their correspondence stopped for a ...g time. It seemed that Vova's father had ...pped out of the ranks of fighters. But Anna ...khailovna did not give him up, just as she did ... give up little Vova when even the doctors ...ought him hopeless. She went on writing to ... and patiently waited for a letter in reply.

He had been gravely wounded. On recovering ... returned to the ranks once more. One eve...g, when he came back to his unit from a dan...ous scouting mission, he was handed a great ...ndle of letters which had long been following ... about. He could hardly stand on his feet, ...er the strain of those days and sleepless ...hts all he wanted was to flop down and sleep, ... one glance at the handwriting revived him ... he was wide awake. It was growing dark, ... in the open it was impossible to make out ... fine writing, but he did not feel like going ...de where his comrades were crowded to...her and read the letters there in front of ...erybody. Suddenly, not far from our batteries, ... saw a bright light: it was the feather-grass

burning in the steppe, the breeze was fanning the flames, and the bonfire that had been lit by someone was rapidly becoming a steppe fire, albeit creeping in a safe direction. He went to the fire and, reading the first letter, walked along with the glow.

Maybe someone did see him walking behind a steppe fire with a letter from the distant land of nightingales? And maybe he was not the only soldier who, his business of fighting done, walked after the fire, letter in hand?

Dawn stopped these wanderers and brought them back from the land of nightingales to their usual soldiers' work.

Vova's father told Anna Mikhailovna about his wanderings in the wake of a steppe fire, and ended the letter: "My dearest friend, I must stop now, I hear our artillery going again. You know, shells and manpower do not worry me, we have plenty, all I'm thinking about is a mother's love and its staying power."

He was recovering. In the corner of this letter he made a post scriptum: "My dearest friend, would you do me the honour..." Anna Mikhailovna smiled and, shedding tears, glanced into the mirror...

GRANNY AND GRANDDAUGHTER

There is an old woman, Yevdokia Ivanovna, who lives in the children's home. She has to go down the steep stairs three times a day to feed

ner chickens. Those steps are a menace for some-ne so old and feeble, but once she has reached ner bench and recovered from the ordeal, she nvariably sees something that no one else has noticed, marvels at something, responds in her wn way and takes part in whatever is hap-pening.

It may well be that the family character of his children's colony, which everyone remarks pon, comes largely from this old granny whom o one seems to care for or need. She used to ve in Leningrad in service with some good people, and she served them so devotedly that she never gave herself a thought, and it was only here, in Botik, that she did and in her old age marvelled at everything. And the first thing that amazed her was the song of a nightingale.

She had lived in Leningrad all her life and never once took the trouble to go to the islands n spring to hear the nightingales. Thus, her whole life passed without the nightingales' song. It seems that good people tie one down far more securely than bad people: one cannot run away from them.

And so after the frightening catastrophe, after the perilous journey across Lake Ladoga with the enemy bombing the evacuees, after the fear of freezing to death here in Botik, if the winter turned out to be as cold as the year before last, spring came at last, and the nightingale sang for our granny.

"Granny, open the window, it's a lovely eve-ning," she was told.

"Bless you, dearies, the thunderstorm hasn't passed yet."

"It has passed, there's a rainbow, open the window, don't be afraid."

The window into the park was thrown wide. The rain over, a warm humidity had gathered in the thickets of acacias and lilacs, bird-cherry and ash trees.

"Here now, come and listen, Granny, this is a nightingale singing."

"Where?"

"Just listen: hear the whistling?"

"I hear it."

"Listen to the trills, and the warbling! "

"The wonder of it! " whispered the old woman.

She sat down at the window. And she stayed there all night, like a young girl in love. To her, the song of the nightingale probably sounded sweeter and lovelier than it does to us: we've been listening to nightingales since childhood, and perhaps we missed the one song intended for us, for one of us in particular.

"Listen to the bag of tricks! " Granny repeated in delight.

Almost a month had passed since she heard her first nightingale. Hundreds of them are now singing in the bushes all round, the sweetbrier is already in flower, and you can hear the quails beating about in the fields, and the rails screeching in the damp meadows.

The children have had a good night sleep, they've had their breakfast, and now they emerge from the house in groups, some heading for the vegetable gardens and others simply for the grass and flowers between the ancient birches. Each group is shepherded by a teacher so that not a lamb should stray from the fold.

With her keen eye, Granny has picked out one of these lambs, a tiny one, and soon learnt that this was Teresa. Her mother came to the Soviet Union with refugee Spanish children; here she married a Russian boy, Rybakov, who was a member of the Komsomol, and died together with him in besieged Leningrad, leaving this tiny creature, Teresa. And here is this Spanish girl walking amid Russian grass and flowers, a fair child who looks like a miniature flower-girl in Paris, so small that only her head with the turned-up nose shows above the tall grass.

Teresa does not make her way to Granny simply, she does not even seem to be going to her or leaving her group. She only makes a small step, in Granny's direction, stops, then makes another step, and the nearer she comes and the farther she leaves her group behind the more copiously pour her tears. If she were caught now she would probably say that she had lost her way in the tall grass and did not know where to go, and because she was crying she would be believed. But no one takes any notice of this very little girl, Granny is the only one watching her and marking how the distance between them shortens little by little.

"Look at the slyboots," Granny mutters and smiles. But even she is put out when, between the birches, she sees how pallid is the child's face and how copious her tears.

"Why are you crying, child?"

"My head aches."

"Your tummy too, perhaps?"

"My tummy too."

Granny understands everything: there is nothing for it, she'll have to give her a "cure". She heaves herself up from the bench, leaning hard on her stick, and slowly walks to the stairs, with Teresa coming behind her, followed by a large hen and a trickle of clean little chicks.

Now at last they are in Granny's room. There is a place on her bed where Teresa feels at home.

Granny does not pry, and only asks:

"D'you have a headache?"

"Yes, Granny."

"Here is something for your headache."

And she gives her a cup of milk and a rusk.

When Teresa has drunk the milk, Granny asks:

"You have a tummy ache too, I think you said?"

"Yes, my tummy too."

"Here, take this for your tummy."

And she gives her a piece of bread with carrot jam.

Teresa, with her hunger appeased, brightens up and, smiling, says to Granny:

"I think everything has passed, Granny."

"Well, that's fine, child, go now, bless you,"

and the Russian Granny makes the sign of the cross over her Spanish granddaughter.

NIGHTINGALE

People who have lost one another in the war walk along forest paths with a twig of apple blossom or a bunch of lilies-of-the-valley in their hands. So much water has been carried off the forest stream since they had lost each other! Their wounded hearts were already beginning to heal amid the lovely spring flowers and the joyfully comforting songs of birds.

And suddenly, at the crossing of the paths, two people meet, they kiss and hug, they trample underfoot the flowers they have dropped, and they listen neither to the nightingales nor the finches.

But nightingales have a law of their own: they've got to toil, that is to sing, whether people listen to them or not, they have to sing, always and for everyone.

And now these two, when their joy has been told in their kissing and hugging, pick up the flowering twig of wild apple and the lilies-of-the-valley, and again listen to the singing of the finches and the nightingales.

And our poor little children, rescued from freezing and starving to death, how happily they run about again among the flowers, the living birds, the beetles and the butterflies!

All of them are orphans, but a new, beautiful world is being created for them by the best efforts of the state and the curative powers of Nature.

A nightingale is singing his everlasting song of joy. A child clutches at this song, and climbs up and up along this song, as if it were a magic ladder, and creates for himself a new, wonderful mother.

THE SUN'S STOREHOUSE

A True Fairy Tale

English translation © Progress Publishers 1975

1

Two little children were orphaned in a village not far from the Bludov Marsh, outside the town of Pereslavl-Zalesski. Their mother died of an illness, and their father was killed in World War II.

We lived in the same village, only two doors away from the house where these children lived. And so of course we did what we could, with the other neighbours, to help them. They were very sweet. Nastya was like a long-legged golden chick. Her hair was neither dark nor fair, but shot through with gold, and she had big freckles like golden coins all over her face, they were so thickly scattered that there hardly seemed to be room for them, and they spread on all sides. The only place free from them was her little turned-up nose.

Mitya was two years younger than his sister.

He was only ten. He was short and very sturdy, with a big forehead and a broad back to his head. He was a stubborn strong little boy.

The schoolteachers called him among themselves "The Little Farmer".

Like Nastya's, his face was a mass of golden freckles, and his nose, too, was free from freckles and turned up at the end. The peasant homestead became the property of the children after their parents' death—a large cottage, the cow Zorka, the calf Dochka, the goat Dereza, some anonymous sheep and chickens, Petya, the golden cock, and Khren, the piglet.

With this wealth the poor little things inherited many cares for all these living creatures. But our children had to overcome greater troubles during the strenuous years of the war. At first some distant relations of the children, and we who were their neighbours, came to their aid. But soon the children, who were very intelligent and the best of friends, learned to do everything themselves, and got on splendidly.

What clever children they were! Whenever possible they took part in the life of the village. Their little noses were seen in the fields, meadows, and stock-yards of the collective farm, at meetings and in the anti-tank ditches. And these little noses were extremely perky.

Although we were new arrivals to the village, we were familiar with the life going on in every house. And it is safe to say that there was not a single house in which the inhabitants lived and

worked so harmoniously as in the house of our little favourites.

Just like her mother, Nastya got up long before the sun, before day began to break, as soon as she heard the shepherd sound his horn. She drove her beloved flock through the gate with a twig in her hand, and trundled back to the cottage. She did not go back to bed but heated the stove, peeled the potatoes, got the dinner ready, and kept busy right till the evening.

Mitya's father had taught him to make vessels from wood—barrels, tubs, troughs. Mitya had a cooper's instrument twice as tall as himself. And with this instrument he adjusted boards together and put iron or wooden hoops round them.

Since they had a cow the children did not really need to sell wooden vessels in the market, but there were always plenty of good folk who wanted a tub to go under the washstand, a rain-water butt, a little vat for salted cucumbers or mushrooms, or simply a small wooden receptacle with a zigzag rim for potted plants.

Mitya would do what was wanted, and the recipient would do him a good turn. But aside from his cooper's work he had to do all the man's jobs on the farm, and he also had his social responsibilities. He attended all the collective-farm meetings, trying to understand what the social tasks meant and no doubt taking something in.

It was a very good thing that Nastya was two years older than her brother, otherwise he would certainly have put on airs, and the friendship,

the wonderful equality between them would never have existed. As it was, Mitya every now and then remembered how his father had told his mother what to do, and took it in his head to order his sister Nastya about in the same way. But his sister took very little notice, only stood there smiling... Then the Little Farmer would lose his temper and strut about, bristling up and saying:

"So there! "

"What are you bristling up about?"

"So there! " her brother would repeat angrily. "It's you who's bristling up, Nastya, not me."

"No, it's you! "

"So there! "

After teasing her obstinate brother a little, Nastya would give him a pat on the back of the head, and as soon as this small hand touched the broad back of his head, the master of the house would abandon the tone of assumed parental authority.

"Let's weed the kitchen-garden! " the sister would say.

And they would both set to weeding the cucumber beds, or the potato patch, or would hoe the beetroots.

2

The cranberry, that tart but wholesome berry, grows in the bogs in the summer, and is gathered

in the late autumn. But it is not everyone who knows that the cranberry is at its best, is *sweet* as we say here, after it has wintered beneath the snow.

That spring the snow still lingered in the dense copses of firs till the end of April, but it was a great deal warmer in the bogs, and by now there was no snow left at all. When Mitya and Nastya discovered this, they decided to go and look for cranberries. Nastya had fed all her charges before daybreak. Mitya shouldered his father's double-barrelled Tula gun, pocketed a grouse whistle, and did not forget to take the compass. His father had never gone into the woods without this compass. Mitya had often asked him:

"You've been going about the woods all your life, you know them so well. What do you need that thing for?"

"You see, son," his father would answer, "that thing is better than your own mother, when you're in the woods. Sometimes the sky clouds over and you can't find your way in the woods by the sun, and have to guess which direction to take, and make a mistake, lose your way, get hungry. But you only have to look at the needle and it tells you where your house is. Follow the needle all the way home and you will find food and shelter there. That needle is your best friend—your own people may deceive you, but the needle always points north, wherever you are, however you turn and twist it."

With a fond glance at the miraculous object, Mitya fixed the needle so that it should not quiver needlessly on the way. He wound strips of linen neatly round his feet as his father used to, and tucked them into his boots, then he put on a cap so old that the peak gaped– the uppermost layer reaching up towards the sun, the lower descending almost to his nose. He next put on his father's old jacket, or rather a collar which held together strips of what had once been good homespun. The lad secured these strips over his stomach with a belt, and his father's jacket made a coat for him, reaching to the very ground. The hunter's son then thrust an axe into his belt, slung a pouch with the compass in it over his right shoulder and the double-barrelled Tula gun over his left, thus making himself a thing of terror for all birds and beasts.

Nastya prepared for the expedition by folding a long towel into a shoulder strap and attaching a large basket to the ends.

"What's the towel for?" asked Mitya.

"Why–have you forgotten?" exclaimed Nastya. "Don't you remember how Mummy used to go for mushrooms?"

"Mushrooms! A lot you know! There's always such a lot of mushrooms that the strap cuts your shoulder."

"And how do you know there won't be even more cranberries?"

Mitya was just going to come out with his "So there! " when he remembered what his

father had told them about cranberries, before he went away to the war.

"Do you remember what Father told us about cranberries, and the Palestine* in the woods?"

"I remember him telling us he knew a place where the cranberries simply drop into your hand," said Nastya, "but I don't know anything about any Palestine. And I remember him telling us about an awful place called the Blind Swamp."

"Well—the Palestine is just next to it," said Mitya. "Father said—go to the High Crest and then keep on going north, and when you have crossed the ridge of the Echoing Knoll, keep on going north and you will see the Palestine coming to meet you, as red as blood, because it's all over cranberries. Nobody has ever yet been there."

Mitya said this as he was going out of the house. While he was talking Nastya remembered that there was a whole pot of boiled potatoes left over from yesterday. Forgetting all about the Palestine, she slipped quietly to the stove and spilt the potatoes out of the pot into her basket.

"We might get lost," she said to herself. "We have plenty of bread with us and a bottle of milk, and the potatoes might come in handy too."

*Palestine, a word given by country people for some favorite spot in the woods.

Her brother, who thought his sister was just behind him all the time, went on telling her about the Palestine, which was so wonderful, but to get to it you had to cross the Blind Swamp where many had perished—human beings, cows, and horses.

"Well, then, tell me about this Palestine of yours."

"So you weren't listening?" he exclaimed.

And he patiently repeated to her as they went along what he had heard from his father about this Palestine which nobody knew about, and where the sweet cranberries grew.

3

The Bludov* Marsh where we ourselves have so often lost our way, starts like almost every big swamp, with a dense thicket of willows, alders and other bushes. The first person to make his way through this approach to the bog had done so with an axe in his hand, hacking out a passage for those who came after. Human feet had trodden down the hummocks on the surface of the bog, and the path had become a ditch filled with flowing water. In the dark before the dawn the children got through this place without much difficulty. And when the view was no longer obscured by bushes, the swamp lay

*Untranslatable allusion. The name *Bludov* Marsh means marsh where people lose their way.—*Tr.*

before them in the early morning light, like a sea. As a matter of fact this Bludov Marsh had once upon a time been the bottom of an ancient sea. And just as there are islands in the real sea, and oases in the desert, there are mounds in bogs. In our Bludov Marsh these mounds are sandy and covered with pinewood, and the people call them *borina.* Passing a little way over the swamp the children got on the nearest mound which went by the name of High Crest, where, by standing on a bare spot on the top, they could just make out the Echoing Knoll, hazy in the grey light of the approaching dawn.

Before they had reached the Echoing Knoll they began to see blood-red berries here and there quite close to the path. At first they popped these berries into their mouths. Anyone who had never tasted autumn cranberries and began by eating the spring berries would hardly be able to endure their acidity. But the village orphans knew very well what autumn cranberries were, and so, when they tasted the spring berries, they exclaimed:

"How sweet! "

The Echoing Knoll offered the children the freedom of a spacious glade, which was even now, in April covered with dark-green red bilberry leaves. Amidst this last year's greenery the white snowdrops and the tiny, fragrant purple blossoms of what we call "wolves' bast" peeped out here and there.

"They smell so nice, try to pick one of them," said Mitya.

Nastya tried to break off a stem but could not.

"Why is it called 'wolves' bast'?" she asked.

"Father said the wolves weave themselves baskets from them," her brother answered. And he laughed.

"And are there still wolves here?"

"Aren't there just? Father said the awful Grey Squire wolf lives here."

"Oh, yes, the one that used to kill our sheep before the war."

"Father said he lives down the Dried-Up Stream."

"He won't attack us?"

"He'd better try! " said the hunter with the split peak to his cap.

While the children chattered, and the morning grew towards sunrise, the Echoing Knoll was filled with birds' songs, and with the howlings, gruntings and cries of small animals. They did not all come from the mound, but they all resounded against it, from the damp, soft surface of the bog. The mound, with its pines, resonant on its dry slope, gave back echoes to all these sounds.

How the poor birds and animals strained themselves to say something which everyone should understand, just one beautiful word! And children, even such simple children as Nastya and Mitya, understood their efforts. They all wanted to utter just one beautiful word.

A bird was singing on a bough, and every feather in its body could be seen quivering

from its efforts. But birds cannot use words as we can, so they have to warble, to utter cries, to tap out their meaning.

"Rat-tat! " rapped out the huge wood-grouse, but it could scarcely be heard in the dark wood.

"Quack-quack! " cried the wild drake as it flew over the river.

"Criak-criak! " came from the wild duck on the lake.

"Goo-goo! " gurgled the pretty bullfinch from a birch-tree.

The snipe, a small, grey bird with a long beak like a flattened hairpin, rent the air with sounds like the bleating of a wild ram. The woodcock seemed to be crying "Cheevecheeve! " Somewhere a black grouse was muttering and chuckling, and the ptarmigan laughed fiendishly.

We hunters learned long ago, in our childhood, to distinguish, to welcome, to understand the word they are all vainly striving to utter. And when we go into the woods in the early spring at dawn, and hear their voices, we say this word to them as if they could understand us—"Good morning! "

And then they seem to be happy, too, as if they had also caught up the wonderful word escaping from the lips of human beings.

And in reply they utter their quacks and rat-tats, trying to greet us in all their voices:

"Good morning! Good morning! "

But amidst all these sounds one, which was like no other, could be distinctly heard.

"Hear that?" said Mitya.

"Of course I do," replied Nastya. "I've been listening to it for a long time and it frightens me."

"There's nothing to be frightened of. Father told me about it, and showed me, too—that's how hares cry in spring."

"Why do they?"

"Father said they're trying to say: 'Good morning, Mother Hare! ' "

"And what's that booming sound?"

"Father said it was the bittern, the marsh bull."

"And what makes him boom?"

"Father said he has a wife, and is saying 'Good morning, Mistress Bittern' to her, like everyone does."

And suddenly everything was fresh and cheerful as if the earth had been washed all over, the sky became bright, and a delicious smell came from the bark and buds of all the trees. And at that very moment, drowning all the other sounds, and quite different from them all, came a triumphant shout, like the shout men would give if they could all shout together with joy:

"Victory! Victory! "

"What's that?" asked Nastya, radiant with happiness.

"Father told me it was the cranes greeting the sun. It means the sun will soon be up."

But the sun had not yet risen when the seekers after sweet cranberries got down to the great marsh. Here the ceremony of greeting the

in had not yet begun. The small, crooked firs nd birches were still tucked up in a blanket of ey mist which muffled the lovely sounds com- g from the Echoing Knoll. The only sound was heartbreaking, plaintive wail.

"What's that, Mitya?" asked Nastya, shrink- g. "What's that howling so dreadfully, far way?"

"Father said," replied Mitya, "it was the olves howling over the Dried-Up Stream. I pect that's the Grey Squire. Father said all the olves on the bank of the Dried-Up Stream have een killed, but nobody can kill the Grey Squire."

"Why does he howl so dreadfully?"

"Father said the wolves howl in spring be- use there's nothing for them to eat. And the ey Squire is all alone, so he howls."

The dampness of the marsh seemed to pene- ate their bodies and chill their very bones. hey didn't feel a bit inclined to go further into e damp, oozy bog.

"Which path shall we take?" asked Nastya.

Mitya took out the compass, discovered here the north was, and said, pointing to a nt track leading north:

"We're going north along that path."

"No," said Nastya, "we're going along that e path where everyone goes. Don't you re- mber Father telling us about that frightful nd Swamp, and how many people and ani- als perished there? No, no, Mitya dear, don't 's go there! Everyone goes this way, so it ust be there that the cranberries grow."

"A lot you know about it! " the hunter interrupted her. "We're going north, the way Father told me, that's where the Palestine is, where nobody has ever yet been."

Nastya, seeing that her brother was beginning to get angry, suddenly smiled and stroked the back of his head. Mitya calmed down at once, and the children took the path shown by the needle, no longer side by side, but walking Indian file.

4

Some two hundred years ago the sower-wind wafted two seeds to the Bludov Marsh—the seed of a pine-tree and the seed of a fir-tree. They both fell into the same hollow beside a large flat stone. And the pine-tree and the fir-tree grew up together. Their roots became intertwined in their infancy, their trunks soared upward towards the light side by side, striving to overtake one another. These trees of different species fought with their roots for sustenance, with their branches for light and air. As they grew taller and taller, their trunks thickening, they pierced one another's living bodies with their dry branches, in some places driving them right through the trunks. The malicious wind, which had forced such a wretched life on the trees, sometimes flew overhead to make their branches sway. And then the trees groaned and howled all over the Bludov Marsh like living

creatures, so that the fox, rolled up in a ball on the mossy crust of the marsh, lifted her sharp nose. These groans and howls affected all living creatures, and a dog which had run wild in the marsh, hearing them, would howl its longing for man, while the wolf howled its undying hatred for him.

The children reached the place of the Flat Stone just at the moment when the first rays of the sun flying over the low crooked marsh firs and birches were lighting up the Echoing Knoll, making the powerful trunks of the pines look like candles burning in some great temple of Nature. The birds' greeting to the rising of the great sun reached this flat stone on which the children sat down to rest, very faintly.

The whole of nature was utterly still and the children, now rather chilly, were so quiet that the black grouse, Kosach, took no notice of them. He was perched high overhead, where the branches of the pine and the fir were interlaced, forming a bridge between the two trees. Kosach, establishing himself at this place, which was quite a broad one for him, nearer to the fir than to the pine, seemed to be blossoming in the rays of the rising sun. The crest on his head blazed like a fiery flower, the blue glint in his black breast-feathers looked almost green. His brightly coloured tail, spread out in the form of a lyre, was the most beautiful part of him. Catching sight of the sun as it rose above the puny marsh firs, Kosach gave a sudden leap on his elevated bridge, disclosing the

snow-white, perfectly laundered underclothes beneath his tail and wings, and cried:

"Choo-chee! "

Choo, in black grouse language, probably stands for "sun", while *chee* may be an equivalent for our "good morning".

In answer to this first "choo-chee", the mating-call of Kosach, the entire marsh resounded with the same cry, accompanied by a great flapping of wings, and in a very short time big birds, strikingly like our Kosach, came to the Flat Stone by the dozen, and perched round it.

The children were sitting on the cold stone, waiting with bated breath for the sun's rays to fall upon them and warm them a little. At last the first ray, lighting up the tops of the small fir-trees nearby, played on the children's cheeks. And Kosach, from his seat on the boughs overhead, paid his respects to the sun by desisting from his jumps and "choo-chees". Crouching low on his lofty perch, he stretched his long neck along the bough, and embarked on a long-drawn song like the gurgling of a stream. In reply dozens of birds, all cocks like himself, and exactly like him, stretched their necks out and took up his song. Now it sounded as if a great river were splashing and gurgling over invisible pebbles.

Time and again we hunters, sitting through the dark, chilly hours of early morning, listening with awe, have tried to understand this song. And when we tried to repeat their mut-

terings in our own way, it would come something like this:

Ur-tur-goo,
I'll fly at you!
Ur-tur-goo,
At you, at you!

Thus warbled the black grouse in friendly unison, while getting ready for a fight. And while they warbled their song, a little incident took place in the very depths of the dense fir-top. A mother-crow sat on her nest, trying hard to avoid notice from Kosach, who was singing his mating-song quite close to the nest. The crow would gladly have driven Kosach away, but she did not dare expose her eggs to the chill air of morning. The father-crow, whose duty it was to guard the nest, had not yet come back from his morning rounds; he had probably met with something of a suspicious nature on his flight, and was therefore late. Awaiting his return, Mother-Crow crouched in her nest, keeping as quiet as a mouse. Suddenly she saw her mate flying towards the nest, and uttered a loud "Kra! ", obviously signifying "Help! "

"Kra! " cawed Father-Crow, addressing his remark to the singers, implying that there was no knowing who would fly at whom.

Taking the situation in at a glance, Father-Crow alighted upon the bridge of boughs on which his nest was built and where Kosach was singing his mating-song but nearer the

pine-tree. Taking no notice whatever of the crow, Kosach gave a call familiar to all hunters:

"Car-car-caks! "

It was a signal for the fight of the mating-cocks to begin. How the feathers flew! As if he, too, were obeying the signal, Father-Crow took a few mincing steps along the bridge towards Kosach.

Seated on the stone, motionless as statues, were our hunters after sweet cranberries. The sun, warm and clear, rose opposite them above the stunted marsh firs. At the same time a small cloud appeared in the sky. It shot across the rising sun like a cold blue arrow, dividing it in two. A gust of wind made the pine-tree lean against the fir, which growled in reply.

Refreshed by their rest on the stone, and warmed by the sun, Nastya and Mitya got up to go on with their journey. But from the very foot of the stone the wide marsh path was forked: one path, looking safe and firm, went to the right, while a fainter one pointed straight ahead.

Verifying the directions of the paths with his compass, Mitya pointed to the fainter path and said:

"We have to take that one, it goes north."

"But it's not a path at all," retorted Nastya.

"So there! " said Mitya angrily. "People have walked along it, and that means it is a path! We must go north. Come on, and stop talking."

Nastya felt the indignity of submitting to Mitya, who was her junior.

"Kra! " cried Mother-Crow from her nest.

Father-Crow took a few more steps towards Nastya along the bridge, covering half the distance between them this time.

A second dark-blue arrow crossed the sun's face, and grey clouds gathered in the sky.

Nastya took courage and tried to talk her brother round.

"Look how firm my path is," she said. "Everyone goes this way. Why should we think ourselves cleverer than other people?"

"Let others go that way," said the obstinate little Farmer resolutely. "We must follow the needle, as Father taught me, and go north towards the Palestine."

"Father was telling us fairy tales, he didn't really mean it," said Nastya. "And very likely, there is no such place as the Palestine. It would be very silly of us to follow the needle: we won't find any Palestine, but we're sure to land in the Blind Swamp."

"All right," said Mitya suddenly, turning away. "I won't argue with you any more. You go along your path, where all the women go for their cranberries, and I'll take mine, to the north, all by myself."

And he walked away along his path, forgetting all about the basket for the cranberries, and the food.

Nastya ought to have reminded him about it, but she was so angry that she only spat after him, her face as red as fire, and went along the common path for her cranberries.

"Kra! " said Mother-Crow.

And Father-Crow, quickly covering the distance between himself and Kosach, gave the latter a peck with all his might. Kosach started as if someone had poured boiling water down his back and endeavoured to join the other grouse who were flying away, but the irate crow overtook him, pulled a bunch of feathers, white and multi-coloured, from his tail, scattering them in the wind, flying after him, chasing him far away from his nest.

Then the grey mass in the sky came lower down, obscuring the sun and its vivifying rays. A sharp blast came from the cruel wind. The trees with the intertwined roots, piercing one another with their boughs, filled the Bludov Marsh with their howling, growling and moaning.

5

So piteous was the wail raised by the trees that it brought the hound Travka out of the half-crumbled potato pit near Antipych's hut. and she began howling in unison with the trees.

What was it that made the dog leave its warm. comfortable lair so early in the morning and join the trees in their piteous wail?

The howling, growling and moaning of the trees that morning made one think of a child. abandoned or lost in the woods and crying bitterly.

And that was the one sound Travka could not

cure, it would rouse her at midnight, at any e of the night. The dog could not stand the l raised by the two trees condemned to w together forever, for they reminded her her own grief.

It was now two years since the terrible disas- had come upon Travka: her worshipped ester, the old hunter Antipych had died.

For years we had been in the habit of going er to Antipych to hunt. Antipych was so old e had himself lost count of his years, he lived e and on in his hunting-lodge, and it seemed e would never die.

"How old are you, Antipych?" we used to . "Are you eighty?"

"More."

"A hundred?"

"Less."

Thinking he was merely making fun of us, and ew how old he really was, we would go on:

"Tell us the truth, Antipych, how old are u, really?"

"The truth," the old man would answer. "I tell you the truth, if you tell me what th is, what it is like, where it lives, how one find it."

It was hard to find an answer to that.

"You're older than us, Antipych," we said. "Surely, you know more about truth than we "

"I do," Antipych would answer with a uckle.

"Well, then, tell us! "

"No, I can't tell you yet awhile, you must search for it yourselves. Come to me just before I die, and I'll whisper into your ears all the truth. You will come, won't you?"

"Of course we will. But we might not know when to come, and you may die without us."

The old man screwed up his eyes as he did when in a teasing mood.

"You're not such babes yourselves, you know," he said. "It's time you found something out for yourselves, but you go on asking questions instead. All right, if I happen to die when you're not here, I'll whisper it into Travka's ear. Travka! " he called.

A big reddish dog with a black narrow stripe running down its back entered the hut. It had a black semicircle under each eye and this made its eyes seem bigger than they were and now those big eyes seemed to be saying:

"What did you call me for, Master?"

Antipych looked at her in a special way, and the dog understood the man at once: it had been a friendly summons, he had no orders to give. but merely wished for her company, to share a good-natured joke. Travka wagged her tail. sinking her body lower as she advanced, and at last crawling up to the old man's knees, she turned herself over on her back, displaying a light-coloured belly with six pairs of black nipples. Before Antipych had time to stretch his arm out to stroke her, she was up again, her front paws on his shoulders, licking his nose, his cheeks, even his lips.

"That'll do, that'll do," he said, calming the dog and wiping his face with his sleeve.

Then, patting her on the head, he said once more: "That'll do, now, go back."

Travka turned and went out.

"There you are, friends," said Antipych. "Look at Travka, a mere hound, she understands everything I say, and you, my sillies, you must go on asking where truth lives. All right then, live and be here when the time comes. And if you should miss me, I'll whisper it all to Travka."

And one day Antipych died. Soon after that the war began. No other forester was appointed in his place, and his lodge was left empty. The house was very old, older even than Antipych himself, and it had to be propped all round. One day the wind, seeing the master was absent, thought it would have a little game with the hut, and the hut fell apart as a card-house falls when a child breathes on it. In less than a year the tall stalks of the willow-herb came shooting through the logs, and all that was left of the house was a small mound in the glade covered with reddish flowers. And Travka moved to the potato pit and lived in the woods like the wild beasts.

But it was not easy for her to adjust herself to the life of a wild beast. She had hunted game for Antipych, her great and generous master, but never for herself. Very often, while out hunting, she caught a hare. Tucking it under her forepaws she would then drop on to her belly, waiting for Antipych to come out, and never venturing to

touch the hare, however hungry she was at the time. And if Antipych for some reason failed to come, she would pick up the hare in her teeth, and with head high in the air so that it would not get knocked about too much, carry it home. Thus she had worked for Antipych, not for herself. And her master had loved her, fed her and protected her from the wolves. And now that Antipych was dead, she had to live for herself, as wild beasts do. When chasing a hare she would sometimes forget she was chasing it not for Antipych, but merely to catch it and eat it herself. Sometimes Travka would be so oblivious to the present, that when she caught a hare she would carry it back to the hut, and then, hearing the trees moan, would get on to the little mound that once had been the hut, and howl...

The Grey Squire had been listening attentively to that howling for a long time...

6

Antipych's hut was close to the Dried-Up Stream, where a few years ago our hunters' brigade had been summoned by the local farmers. The local hunters had found out that there was a big family of wolves somewhere near the Dried-Up Stream. We went to the aid of the farmers and set out to work in accordance with all the rules of warfare against beasts of prey.

In the night we went to the Bludov Marsh, imitated the wolf howl and got an answering howl from all the wolves inhabiting the banks of the Dried-Up Stream. Thus we discovered exactly where they lived, and how many of them there were. They lived on the cluttered, impassable bed of the Dried-Up Stream. A great war had raged there in the past between the stream and the trees. The stream fought for its freedom, while the trees stood guarding the banks. The stream had won the day, and the trees fell across, but after that the water ran into the marsh and was lost. Trunks of trees lay rotting tier upon tier, across the bed. Grass made its way through the prostrate trunks, and ropes of ivy twisted round the trunks of young aspen-trees, which had sprung up in vast numbers. A firm dam was formed, or, as the hunters called it, a wolves' stronghold.

When we ascertained the dwelling place of the wolves we went round it on our skis, describing a circle of some three kilometres, and hanging strings of little red flags of pungent-smelling bunting from bush to bush. Wolves fear the colour, and the very smell of new bunting alarms them, and when the wind moves the flags as it ripples through the thicket, the wolves are apt to lose heart.

We made openings in the circle according to the number of our guns. In each opening, crouching behind the dense branches of a fir-tree, was a man with a gun.

Shouting from time to time, and knocking

their sticks together the beaters roused the wolves, and at first they turned towards their lair. The she-wolf led the way, her young following, and behind them, strutting, as it were, on his own, was the great, heavy-headed old wolf, the notorious villain whom the peasants had nicknamed the Grey Squire.

The wolves moved with great caution. The beaters pressed on. The she-wolf changed to a trot. When suddenly—

Stop! Flags!

She turned another way, but there again—

Stop! Flags!

The beaters pressed closer and closer. The old she-wolf, her native intelligence forsaking her, tried at random this way and that, and at last found an opening, but was met with a bullet in her head shot from less than ten paces away.

That was the end of the pack, but the Grey Squire had been in scrapes like this before, and, when he heard gunshots, simply leaped over the flag-line. As he was leaping, two shots were fired at him, one tearing his left ear off, the other, half of his tail.

The wolf family perished, but alone the Grey Squire killed as many cows and sheep in one summer as the whole pack used to.

He usually hid behind a juniper bush, waiting for the moment when the shepherds would leave the herd, or settle down for a sleep. Choosing the right moment, he would rush among the cattle, killing the sheep and mutilating the cows. Then, with a sheep on his back, he would leap

:ver the fence and make for his inaccessible lair :: the Dried-Up Stream. During the winter :onths he rarely succeeded in making his way to : cattle-shed, and was practically reduced to a :et of dog flesh. At last he became so brazen :at once, while chasing a dog following its mas:er's sleigh, he actually tore it out of its master's :rms, where the dog had leaped for protection.

The Grey Squire had become the terror of :e country, and the peasants once more ap:ealed to our brigade for help. Five times we :ied to hedge him in with flags, and five times :e leaped over our flag-lines. And now, in the :arly spring, after a bitter winter, almost perishing :ith cold and hunger, the Grey Squire waited :mpatiently in his lair for the real spring to set :n, and for the village shepherd to sound his horn.

On the morning when the children had quar:elled and taken their separate paths, the Grey Squire lay in his lair in a hungry sulk. When the :ind, spoiling the brightness of the morning, :ade the two trees beside the Flat Stone howl, :e was able to stand it no longer and crept out. He stood over the dam, raised his nose, drew in :is stomach, which was so lean it hardly needed :ny drawing in, cocked his one ear windward, straightened out the stump of his tail, and :aised a howl.

What a piteous howl it was! Stranger, if you should hear it as you pass by, and be stirred to pity, don't let your feelings get the better of you, it is not the voice of a dog, man's best friend, you hear, but that of his worst enemy,

the wolf, the victim of his own evil nature! Withhold your sympathy, stranger, do not give it to those who, like the wolf, howl from self-pity, but save it for those who, like the dog who lost its master, howl because they know not whom to serve any more.

7

The Dried-Up Stream embraces the Bludov Marsh in a wide semicircle. At one end of it howled the dog, at the other, the wolf. And the wind hurled itself against the trees, bearing their moans hither and thither, heedless of whom it served. The wind does not care where the moans and wailings come from, whether from the trees, from man's friend, the dog, or from his most bitter enemy, the wolf, so long as there are sounds for it to carry. The treacherous wind bore the piteous wail of the dog deserted by its master to the ears of the wolf. And the Grey Squire, distinguishing the dog's howl from the moaning of the trees, quietly left his lair, and, pricking up his only ear, his mangled tail taut, ascended a mound. From this vantage point, having discovered that the howling came from near Antipych's hut, he swooped down the slope in that direction.

Fortunately for Travka she was too hungry to continue the sad wailings with which she lamented her fate, or perhaps called for a new master to come to her. It may be that to her

dog's understanding Antipych was not dead, but had merely turned his face from her. Perhaps, to her the whole of mankind seemed to be one Antipych with different faces. And if he turned one of his faces from her, perhaps the same Antipych, with a different face, would soon call her back, and then she would serve this new Antipych as faithfully as she had served the old one...

Yes, that was probably how it was: Travka was calling to her Antipych with all her might.

And the wolf, hearing the dog's detestable prayer for man, loped off in the direction from which it came. If the dog had persisted in her howling for another five minutes, the Grey Squire would have had her. But having uttered her prayer to Antipych, she felt a sharp pang of hunger, stopped calling for Antipych, and went off to try and pick up the scent of a hare.

It was that time of year when the hare, a nocturnal animal, does not lie down at the first sign of the coming day, to wait anxiously with open eyes till nightfall. In spring, the hare fearlessly roams the fields and the roads, even by daylight. Thus a veteran winter hare came to the spot where the children had quarrelled and separated, and, as they had, sat down to rest and listen on the Flat Stone. A sudden gust of wind brought the moans of the trees to his ears, scaring him, so that he jumped off the Flat Stone, lurched off hare-fashion, jerking his hind legs forward, and made for the Blind Swamp, so perilous to man. The hare was still moulting, and

left not only traces of his pads on the ground, but bits of his winter coat on the bushes and last year's stalks of grass. Although some time had elapsed since the hare had left the stone, Travka immediately scented him. True, she did not at once pick up the scent, because two small human beings had left their scent behind them, as well as the smell of bread and potatoes from their basket.

And so Travka was faced with a knotty problem—should she follow the hare's scent leading to the Blind Swamp, where the footmarks of one of the small men also led, or follow the human scent leading to the right, and skirting the Blind Swamp?

The problem would have solved itself easily if Travka could have made up her mind which of the small men had taken the bread. If only she could have had a bite of that bread, then she would have started on the track of the hare, and brought it to the one who gave her the bread.

Where should she go, which way should she take?

Man, when faced with a problem like that, stops to think, and hunters have coined a special word for the same state in a dog.

And so Travka did what any hunting dog in her place would have done: she began circling round with her nose in the air, moving it up and down, from left to right, intelligent concentration in her eyes.

The wind, blowing from the direction in

which Nastya had gone, brought Travka to an abrupt stop in her circlings. She stood still for a moment, and then got on her hind legs, like a hare.

Something of this sort had happened once before, while Antipych was alive. The forester was engaged in a rather difficult job of measuring timber. To have Travka out of the way, Antipych had tied her down near the hut. The forester left in the early morning. But it was only towards dinner-time that Travka realised that the other end of the chain was tied to an iron hook attached to a thick rope. As soon as she understood this, she scrambled up on the earth banked round the foot of the house, then on to her hind legs, pulled the rope towards herself with her front paws, and by evening had contrived to bite through the rope. Then, the chain dangling from her collar, she set out to find Antipych. More than twelve hours had passed since Antipych left, the scent was lost, and the traces washed away by a light drizzle, more like dew than rain. But it was so still in the woods that the air had never stirred and the subtle scent of tobacco smoke from Antipych's pipe had remained hanging there since the morning. Travka had been quick to understand that there was no hope of finding Antipych by his footmarks, and so, circling the air with her nose, she suddenly got a whiff of the tobacco smoke, and gradually, now losing the scent, now picking it up again, she reached her master at last.

She remembered that experience now. When

the strong gust of wind brought the suspicious scent to her nose, she stood stock-still for a moment, waiting. When the next gust came, she got on her hind legs, hare-like, as she had done that time, made sure: yes, the bread and potatoes had disappeared to windward, together with one of the small men.

Travka went back to the Flat Stone, to compare the smell left by the basket with the one brought by the wind. Then she had another sniff at the traces left by the other small man and the hare. She must have reasoned to herself thus:

"The hare will have gone straight to his daytime lair, he must be somewhere near, by the Blind Swamp, settled there for the day, and he won't leave. But the man with the bread and potatoes might disappear. And then, what's the joy of chasing a hare to tear it up and eat it all by myself, compared to the happiness of receiving bread and kindness from man, perhaps even finding in him Antipych?"

Casting one more glance in the direction of the traces leading straight towards the Blind Swamp, Travka turned towards the path skirting the swamp on the right, rose on her hind legs once more, and with one wag of her tail trotted along the path.

8

The Blind Swamp, towards which Mitya, following the needle of the compass, had gone, was

a perilous place, and many a man, not to speak of cows and sheep, had been submerged there. Certainly nobody ought to set out for the Bludov Marsh without knowing the sort of place the Blind Swamp is.

The Bludov Marsh, as we see it, with its enormous resources of peat, is the sun's storehouse. Yes, that is just what it is, and the warm sun is the parent of every blade of grass, every flower, every bush and berry, growing on the marsh. To each of them the sun gives its warmth, and each of them, as it dies and decomposes to fertilise the ground, bequeaths this warmth to the new blades of grass, flowers, bushes, and berries which grow in their places. But the water in marshes prevents the parent plants from passing on all their wealth to their children. For thousands of years this wealth accumulates under the surface of the water, the marsh thus becoming the sun's storehouse, and then the entire store of peat is inherited by man.

The Bludov Marsh contains enormous resources of fuel, but the peat layers are not the same thickness everywhere. By the Flat Stone, where the children had been sitting, decaying plants had been forming layers on top of one another for thousands of years. The oldest layers of peat were here, but further on, towards the Blind Swamp, the layers were newer and thinner.

Little by little, as Mitya advanced, following the needle of compass and the path, the ground

beneath his feet, up till now merely soft, turned into slush. He would put his foot on what seemed firm ground, and the foot would sink beneath him, and he would ask himself in alarm: was it a bottomless pit? Some hummocks were so wobbly that he had to think well before stepping out. Then it would happen that he put his foot down, and there would be a great rumbling beneath it, the way one's tummy rumbles sometimes, only this rumbling went down, down into the marsh before stopping.

The ground under his feet was now like a hammock suspended over an abyss full of ooze. On this shifting ground, balancing on intertwined roots and the stems of plants, grew stunted, scraggy fir-trees, covered with green mould. Owing to the acid marshy soil they cannot grow any higher, and yet these tiny trees were probably a hundred years old, perhaps older still... These witch fir-trees were not like trees in a forest, tall, slender, as like one another as columns, or candles. The older the marsh fir the uncannier she grew. That one over there raised a bare bough like an arm threatening to catch hold of you, another held a stick in her hand, ready to hit you when you came up to her, the third crouched down for some reason, and another stood knitting. And every one of them was like something that was not just a tree.

The layers of peat under Mitya's feet gradually became thinner and thinner, but the intertwined roots of the plants must have been strong enough to support the weight of a human body,

Mitya, swaying at every step and making everything sway a long way round him, went on and on. All Mitya had to do was to trust the person who had passed that way before him, and even trodden out a path.

The fir-tree witches seemed to be much perturbed at the sight of the small boy with the big gun and double-peaked cap. Every now and then one of them would stand on tiptoe, as if she would like to hit the audacious wayfarer, at the same time leaning forward to protect all the other witches. Then she would sink back, and another witch stretched out a bony hand towards the path. One more step, it seemed, and a glade would open with a witch's hut in the middle, surrounded by a fence with human skulls on the palings.

The black raven guarding his nest in the little wood, and circling the marsh to keep a lookout, caught sight of the small hunter with the double-peaked cap. Like other birds, the raven had a special spring call which a human being can somewhat imperfectly reproduce by a throaty-nasal "Drong-tong! " There are certain imperceptible overtones to the main sound, too subtle for our ear, which make us unable to understand what the ravens are saying, and we can only make blundering guesses, as if we were deaf and dumb.

"Drong-tong! " cried the watchful raven, intimating that a little man with a double-peaked cap and a gun was approaching the Blind Swamp, and that probably something to

eat was to be expected soon.

"Drong-tong! " the she-raven answered from her nest.

By which she meant:

"I hear, and wait."

The magpies, who are near relations of the ravens, on hearing the roll-call, began to screech. Even the fox, who had just returned from an unsuccessful mouse-hunt, pricked up its ears at the raven's call.

Mitya heard it all, but was not a bit down-hearted—was not he walking over a path made by human feet? A man like himself had been there before, so Mitya could follow it fearlessly. Hearing the raven's cry, he even ventured upon a song:

Do not circle, evil raven,
Low over my head.

The song gave him courage, and he thought of taking a short-cut, instead of following the long, strenuous path. Looking down, he noticed that every time he put down his foot water gathered in the hollow it made. The feet of all who had taken this path had pushed the water a little deeper beneath the mossy surface, so that on either side of the path, which was really a streamlet, there grew up on the dry banks high sweet-tasting tassel grass, which now formed a kind of avenue. And this grass, which was not yellow like the spring growth on the rest of the marsh, but whitish, made it possible to trace far

mead the windings of the man-trodden path. And Mitya saw that this path turned sharply to the left, before it quite disappeared in the distance. He found his bearings with the aid of the compass: the needle pointed north, showing that the path led west.

"Tee-vit?" cried the lapwing.

"Cheeve-cheeve! " the woodcock answered.

"Drong-tong! " said the raven, with greater assurance than ever.

And the magpies screeched from the witch firs all round.

Glancing round him, Mitya saw a clear, safe-looking glade in front, where the hummocks, getting lower and lower, finally joined, forming level ground. But the most important thing he saw was the tall whitish grass, the faithful companion of the man-trodden path, quite near the other side of the glade. Discovering by the direction of the tassel grass the path which did not lie due north, Mitya said to himself: "Why should I turn to the left, and step from hummock to hummock, when I can see a path, quite near, just beyond the glade?"

And he went fearlessly on, crossing the smooth glade.

At first it was even easier for Mitya to walk over the fen than it had been in the marsh. But gradually his feet sank deeper and deeper, and it became more and more difficult to pull them out. An elk would have been all right here.

With its long, powerful legs, it can run as swiftly over a bog as it does in the woods. But Mitya, now aware of danger, stopped to think. The moment he stopped, his leg went down to the knee, and the next moment the ooze was still higher. Even now he could have made an effort to pull himself out of the bog and turn back. He did think of twisting round, placing his gun on the surface of the bog, and, leaning on it, clambering out. But, then, just a few paces ahead, he again caught sight of the tall whitish grass which follows human footmarks.

"I'll get there! " he said.

And then he gave a tug.

But it was too late. With the desperation of a wounded man, who tells himself he can only die once, he gave another tug, then another, and yet another. Then he felt that up to his chest he was held in a firm grip. He could not even draw a deep breath now, for the slightest movement made him sink still deeper. There was nothing for it but to place the gun flat on the surface of the bog, lean both arms on it and try to still his rapid breathing. And that was what he did: he took his gun from his shoulder, laid it before him, and leaned on it with both hands.

A sudden gust of wind brought him Nastya's shrill cry:

"Mitya-a-a! "

He shouted back.

But the wind blew from where Nastya stood

and carried his cry across the Bludov Marsh, towards the west, where there was nothing but endless clusters of dwarf firs. Only the magpies answered him, as they flew from one fir-tree to another, circling the Blind Swamp with their usual excited screeching, or perched on the top branches of the firs, haggard, long-tailed and shaggy, with cries of:

"Dritt-titt-tee-ee! " and "Dratt-tatt-a-a! " while the raven cried from overhead:

"Drong-tong! "

Quick to sense mischief, the magpies understood the utter helplessness of the little man submerged in the bog. Swooping down from the tops of the fir-trees and alighting on the ground, they hopped towards him from all sides, embarking on their magpie offensive.

The little man with the double-peaked cap stopped shouting. Glittering streams of tears trickled down his sunburnt cheeks.

9

A person who has never seen cranberries grow may saunter far into the marshes before noticing that he is stepping on berries. It is quite different in the case of bilberries, you can see how they grow: a thin stem shooting up, with little green leaves all round it like wings, and the small silvery-blue berries growing close to the leaves. Or there are red bilberries, blood-red, with thick dark-green leaves which do not

even turn yellow under the snow, while the berries are so abundant that the ground seems to be splashed with blood. Then there is the bog whortleberry, also a marsh plant, which grows on small bushes, the berry itself light-blue, and rather big, you could not help noticing them. In remote thickets, where the wood-grouse dwells, the ruby-coloured pit berries grow in clusters, every ruby in a green setting. The only berries which hide are cranberries, especially in the early spring, on the hummocks, where they are almost invisible from above. It is only when there are a great many berries in one place that you can see them from above, and then you think: "Somebody must have been spilling cranberries," and you stoop down to taste one, and then you pull up the green stem covered with the berries. You can pull out a whole necklace of big, blood-red berries then.

For some reason—whether because the berries are so expensive in spring, or because they are so wholesome and remedial, and so nice with tea—people seem to be unable to stop picking them, and go on and on in a kind of frenzy. There was once an old woman in our village who loaded her basket so heavily with berries that she was unable to lift it. But she could not bear either to throw away or leave her basket behind. So she stayed by it until she died. Sometimes a woman comes upon a patch of berries, gives a quick look round to see there is no one near, and, falling flat on her stomach on the marshy ground, crawls up to them.

At first Nastya picked every berry from its stem, stooping whenever she saw a red one. But soon she stopped bending down for single berries—she wanted to get more at a time.

She could already see at a glance whether there would be one or two, or a whole handful on a stem, and only bent down when there was a prospect of getting a handful. And she dropped fistful after fistful into her basket, becoming more eager with every find.

When she worked about the house, Nastya was never far in thought from her brother, and every so often called out to him. But this time, when he was goodness knows where and all alone, she did not even remember that she had all the food, while her beloved brother was wandering somewhere in the murky marsh, with nothing to eat. And she was not thinking of herself, all she thought of was cranberries, and she wanted more and more of them.

She had quarrelled with her brother because she had wanted to follow the well-trodden path. But now, going where the cranberries led her, Nastya did not even notice that she herself had left the well-trodden path.

There was a moment when she waked from her trance and suddenly realised that she had left the path. She turned towards the place where she imagined the path was, but there was no path there. Then she rushed in the other direction, where two dead trees raised their bare boughs—there was no path there, either. Surely this was the moment for her to remem-

ber the compass, and what Mitya had told her about it, to remember Mitya himself, her beloved brother, wandering alone and hungry, and, remembering him, to call out to him...

And Nastya certainly would have thought of him if she had not at that very moment seen a sight which it is not given to every cranberry-fiend to see in a lifetime...

The children had argued which path to take, not knowing that both paths, the bigger and the smaller one, skirted the Blind Swamp, meeting somewhere at the Dried-Up Stream, where they merged and at last came to the Pereslavl highway. Nastya's path was on dry ground and made a wide detour round the Blind Swamp. Mitya's skirted its very edge. If he had not blundered off the man-trodden path marked by the tall whitish grass for a moment, Mitya would have long found himself on the very spot which Nastya reached only now. And this spot, hedged by juniper bushes was that very spot, the Palestine, which Mitya had hoped to reach by following the needle of his compass. But even if Mitya had got there, what would he do there, on this blood-red Palestine, hungry and basketless? Nastya arrived at the Palestine with her big basket, her store of provisions lying forgotten on the bottom, beneath the acid-tasting berries.

How was it that the little girl, so like a long-legged golden chick, did not think, when the joyful sight of the Palestine opened before her, of her brother and did not shout to him: "Here it is, darling! "

Ah, raven, you prophetic bird! You are probably three hundred years old yourself, and no doubt your mother told you all she had learned during the three hundred years of her life. And so, from bird to bird has passed the knowledge of all that has happened in that marsh for thousands of years. You who have seen and known so much, why do not you for once abandon your raven's business and carry a message on your strong wings, a message of a brother perishing in the bog?! Tell them, oh raven—

"Drong-tong! " cried the raven, as he flew over the head of the man in mortal danger.

"I hear you," answered the she-raven from her nest, in the same "drong-tong" idiom. "Mind you get something before the marsh eats him up."

"Drong-tong! " the father-raven repeated as he flew over the little girl crawling along the damp ground, a few paces away from her brother, who was in such dire peril. This time the "drong-tong" meant that the little girl crawling over the bog might be a still brighter prospect for the raven family.

In the middle of the Palestine there were no cranberries. There was a little hill covered by a dense aspen grove, in the midst of which stood an enormous horned elk. Seen from one angle an elk is like a bull, from others—he looks much like an ordinary horse: the graceful body, the light, slender legs. the muzzle with the sensitive nostrils. But what a strange twist to the muzzle,

what horns, what eyes! You gaze at it and think: perhaps it is neither a bull nor a horse, in fact there is nothing here but an illusion of something huge and grey looming through the greyness of the dense aspen grove. But, no! It must be something more than just that, for did not the monster's thick lips touch the tree, and was not there a narrow white strip left on the delicate tree trunk? That was how the monster fed itself. And there is hardly an asp without the marks of his teeth. No, no, all that bulk could not be merely a marsh mirage! But how incredible that such a giant should be sustained upon aspen bark and the leaves of the marsh shamrock! And why should man, with his wonderful powers, be seized with such greed at the sight of the acid cranberry?

The elk, as he barked the asp, calmly watched the crawling girl from his elevation.

Oblivious to everything but cranberries, she crawled nearer and nearer to a big black tree stump. Wet and dirty, the little girl we once knew as the long-legged golden chick could scarcely drag the basket after her.

The elk did not even regard her as a human being, for her ways were no different from those of animals, which he was accustomed to look at with indifference as we look at lifeless stones.

A big black tree stump stood there, absorbing the sun's rays and getting very warm. Evening was falling, the air and all the objects round were growing colder. But the tree stump, big

and black, still preserved its warmth. Six small beetles crept out of the bog and on to the stump, clinging to its warmth; four lemon-coloured butterflies, their wings folded, pressed their feelers against it; great black flies settled on it for the night. A long cranberry shoot, catching on every grass stem, on every unevenness of the warm black stump, wound itself all round it, turned several times over the top, and descended on the other side. At this time of year the adders are always on a lookout for a warm spot, and a huge one, half a metre long, crawled up the stump and coiled itself on top of the cranberry shoot.

The little girl crawling over the marshy ground never raised her head. Thus she came up to the charred stump, and pulled at the cranberry shoot, upon which the adder was resting. The snake raised its head and hissed. Then the girl raised her head, too.

At last Nastya came to her senses and jumped up, and the elk, recognising her for a human being, leaped out of the aspen grove, and, throwing out his powerful, long, stilt-like legs, sped lightly over the treacherous marsh, just as a winter hare would scuttle along a dry path.

Startled by the elk, Nastya gazed in astonishment at the snake: the adder lay coiled up as before, in the warmth of the sun's ray. Nastya felt as if it was she herself coiled up on the stump, and that the Nastya looking at it in perplexity had just shed her snake's skin.

A few paces from her a big reddish dog with

a thin black stripe along its back stood looking at her. The dog was Travka. Nastya knew her at once, for Travka had sometimes accompanied Antipych when he came to the village. But she could not quite remember the dog's name, and called to her:

"Muravka, Muravka, come, I'll give you a bit of bread! " And she stretched her arm towards the basket. The basket was full to the brim, and the bread was under the cranberries. This meant hours must have passed for her to have filled the basket, dropping berry after berry into it, from early morning to the end of day. Where, then, could her poor hungry brother be, how could she have forgotten all about him, all about herself, too, all about everything in fact?

Casting one more glance at the stump on which the snake was coiled, she suddenly uttered a shrill cry:

"Mitya! Brother! "

And fell beside the basket of cranberries sobbing violently.

It was that cry which had reached the swamp, and which Mitya heard and answered, though his answer was carried away by the wind.

10

The strong gust of wind which had brought Nastya's call to Mitya's ears was not the last before the calm of the evening set in. Just then the sinking sun was passing behind a thick cloud,

from beneath which the golden legs of its throne peeped out.

Nor was the gust which carried Mitya's answering call the last.

The last gust came when the golden legs of the sun's throne seemed to sink into the earth, the huge, clear, crimson orb just touching the horizon. The small song-thrush began its sweet melody. Kosach timidly resumed his mating-song among the now silent trees by the Flat Stone. And the cranes gave three cries, not their morning "victory" call, but something which must have meant:

"Go to sleep, but remember: soon we shall wake you all, all, all! "

The day ended not with a gust of wind but with a last gentle breath. Then there was a great calm, and the slightest sounds, even the gentle whistlings of the hazel-grouse in the thickets of the Dried-Up Stream, became audible.

Understanding that a human being was in distress, Travka came up to the sobbing girl, and licked her cheek, which was salty with tears. For a second Nastya raised her head, looked at the dog, and without a word, let her head fall on top of the berries. Travka could smell the bread through the layer of cranberries but though her hunger was acute she would not have dreamed of taking the liberty of putting her paws into the basket. Instead, seeing that a human being was in distress, she raised her head and howled.

Long, long ago, I seem to remember driving in a troika with bells jingling in the old-fash-

ioned way. Evening was setting in, just as it was now, and the driver had abruptly pulled up the horses, and when the bell grew silent, the driver strained his ears and said:

"Something wrong somewhere! "

We seemed to hear some sort of a sound, too.

"What is it?"

"Something wrong: a dog is howling in the woods."

That time we had not been able to find out what had happened. Perhaps it was a man drowning in the swamp, and man's faithful friend the dog was howling out a dirge.

When Travka's wail reached the ears of the Grey Squire through the evening stillness he at once understood that it came from the Palestine and made straight for it.

But Travka stopped howling very soon. The Grey Squire stood still, waiting for the howling to begin again.

And just then Travka herself heard a familiar, shrill, infrequent yapping, which came from the direction of the Flat Stone. Travka at once knew that it was the fox yapping after a hare. Putting two and two together, she also understood, of course, that the fox had picked up the scent of that very winter hare she herself had detected from the Flat Stone. Travka was also aware that, without cunning, the fox would never overtake the hare, and that it was only yapping to make the hare run off its legs, so as to get it when, wearied with running, it lay down in some lair. Since the death of Antipych,

Travka had employed that method in procuring her food. Hearing a fox yap, she hunted the way the wolf hunts: as the wolf during the chase stands in wait for the dog barking after a hare, so would she lie in ambush, waiting for the moment to capture the hare chased by a fox.

As she listened to the fox's yapping, Travka understood, as well as we hunters understand in such cases, the route the hare would be sure to take: from the Flat Stone towards the Blind Swamp, from there to the Dried-Up Stream, and then, making a wide detour, towards the Palestine, and from there inevitably back to the Flat Stone. And so Travka went straight to the Flat Stone and hid behind a thick juniper bush.

She did not have to wait long. Her keen ears caught the faint sucking sound made by the hare's paws over the marsh pools, a sound too faint for the human ear to catch. And the pools were those which had formed over Nastya's footmarks in the morning. The hare would be there, by the Flat Stone, in a moment.

Travka squatted behind the bush, tensing her hind legs in preparation for a powerful forward thrust, and as soon as she saw a pair of ears, she sprang.

But just then the hare, a big, old winter hare, scarcely able to hobble, took it into its head to come to a standstill, and sat up on its haunches to guess, from the sound, at the distance between itself and the yapping fox.

The hare's abrupt stop, and Travka's leap were simultaneous.

And so Travka was carried over the hare.

By the time the dog had righted itself, the hare was already bounding along Mitya's path towards the Blind Swamp.

So the wolf-method had not worked: now the hare would not be back till it was dark. Adopting the dog-method, Travka rushed after the hare, and after giving a shrill squeal, filled the evening stillness with a regular dog's bark.

When it heard the dog, the fox, of course, abandoned its pursuit of the hare and switched to the routine business of catching field mice...

And the Grey Squire, hearing at last the long-awaited bark of the dog, made for the Blind Swamp at a gallop.

11

When the magpies heard the hare approach they fell into two groups: one, staying by the little man, cried:

"Dritt-titt-tee-ee! "

The others addressed themselves to the hare with a "Dratt-tatt-ta-a-a! "

It is hard to get at the meaning of the magpies' excited gibberish. It could hardly be a call for help, for should help come, whether in the guise of man or dog, the magpies themselves would be the losers. Perhaps they were striving with their cries to summon the entire magpie

race to the bloody repast. Who knows...

"Dritt-titt-tee-ee! " they cried, hopping nearer and nearer to the little man.

They did not dare come quite close to him, for the little man's arms were still free. All of a sudden there was confusion among the magpies. One and the same bird would cry, now "dratt-tatt-ta-a-a", now "dritt-titt-tee-ee".

This was a sign that the hare was approaching the Blind Swamp.

This particular winter hare had had previous experience of avoiding Travka, and knew therefore that it would be necessary to use cunning. And so, on the very edge of the swamp, a few paces from the little man, it stopped, thus rousing the attention of the magpies. They all got on the top branches of the fir-trees and shouted at the hare:

"Dratt-tatt-ta-a-a! "

For some reason or other hares attribute no importance to these cries, and go through their pranks without taking any notice of the magpies. And that is why one sometimes thinks that all this magpie talk means nothing, and that, like men and women, they merely while away their time in idle prattle, out of sheer boredom.

Crouching motionless for a brief moment, the hare took its first great bound aside, then, after another moment's pause, made a bound in the opposite direction, then with a series of short jumps, changed its direction once more, turned round, to keep its eye on its own spoor, in case

Travka, seeing through these manoeuvres, discovered them; at least the hare would see the dog first...

Oh, yes, the hare is cunning, very cunning, but these tricks can be dangerous: an intelligent hound knows the hare has a habit of looking back at its spoor, and so guesses at the direction of its hound not by sniffing at its tracks, but by keeping its nose in the air.

How the beastie's heart begins to beat when it hears the barking no longer, and knows that the dog has started on her ominous silent rounds!

This time the hare was in luck. It realised that the dog, after setting out on her rounds in the swamp must have come across something there; all of a sudden the sound of a human voice was clearly heard, and then there was a terrific hubbub...

One may surmise that the hare, hearing all this noise, said to itself something like "I'd better make myself scarce!" and quietly retraced its steps to the Flat Stone.

As Travka rushed over the swamp after the hare, she suddenly found herself looking right into the eyes of a little man, and, forgetting all about the hare, she stood as if transfixed.

There is no difficulty in guessing what the dog must have thought as she gazed at the little man in the swamp. It is only in our own eyes that we differ from one another. Travka divided humanity into two classes: Antipych with different faces, and the enemies of Antipych. That

is why a good, intelligent dog never approaches a human being on first seeing him, but stops to think whether the human being is its master, or its master's enemy.

And so Travka stood still, looking into the face of the little man, lighted up by the last rays of the sinking sun.

At first the little man's eyes were dull and lifeless, but all of a sudden something seemed to flicker in them, and Travka saw the flicker at once.

"It's more likely to be an Antipych," thought Travka. And she wagged her tail ever so slightly.

We cannot of course tell what it was that made Travka decide who was an Antipych, and who was not. But we can make some guesses. Do you remember, has it ever happened to you, that bending over a still creek in a forest you would suddenly see reflected, as in a mirror, a man at full length, great and full of splendour, as Antipych had been for Travka? He is stooping over the water behind your back, gazing into the pool too, as into a mirror. How wonderful he looks in that mirror, surrounded by the whole of nature, the clouds, the trees; and the sun setting in the creek is the same sun that is setting in the world above and the new moon shows itself, and the thick clusters of stars...

That is probably how Antipych the man appeared as reflected in all human faces to Travka. She would have liked to rush into the arms of every man, if experience had not taught

her that there was an enemy of Antipych with just the same face.

So she stood and waited.

But her paws began gradually sinking too. Even a dog's paws may be sucked into the bog, and it cannot get them out if it stands too long in one place. She must not wait any longer.

Suddenly...

Not thunder nor lightning, nor the sunrise with all its triumphant sounds, nor the sunset accompanied by the cranes' promises of another beautiful day to come, nothing, no miracle of nature could have been greater than the thing which happened to Travka in the marsh: she heard a word in the human language, and what a word!

Antipych, like the true, great hunter he was, had given his hound a proper hunter's name, derived from the Russian verb *travit* (to hunt), and at first our Travka was called Zatravka; but gradually its hunting significance was lost, and the name was shortened to the affectionate Travka. The last time Antipych had been to our village with his dog, she had still gone under the name of Zatravka. And the flicker in Mitya's eyes had meant that he suddenly remembered the dog's name. Then the blood rushed into the blue lips of the little man, so that they turned red and twitched. The movement was not lost on Travka, and that was when she wagged her tail a second time. And then came what to Travka's mind was a miracle. Just like the old Antipych of the early days,

the new Antipych, so small and young, said: "Zatravka! "

Recognising him for an Antipych, Travka immediately lay down.

"Come on! " said the Antipych. "Come on here to me, there's a good dog! "

And Travka slowly crawled up to him in answer to those words.

But it was not in the spirit of pure friendship that the little man was calling to her, whatever Travka may have thought. Behind his words were not merely joy and friendship, but a cunning scheme for his own salvation. If only he could have explained to her his plan in a way she could understand, how joyfully she would have rushed to rescue him.

But there was no way in which he would make her understand him, so he was obliged to deceive her by kind words. It was even necessary that she should fear him, for if she did not, if he could not make her stand in wholesome awe of the great and powerful Antipych, if she had rushed dog-fashion on to his shoulders, the swamp would inevitably have swallowed up both man and his friend, the dog. The little man could not stand up to the ideal of the great man cherished by Travka. So he had to resort to cunning.

"Zatravka, dear Zatravka," he said lovingly, thinking all the while: "Do crawl up nearer, oh, do! "

And the dog, her pure mind feeling something that was not quite pure in the perfectly explicit

words of this Antipych, kept crawling up, pausing every now and then.

"Come on, sweetheart, come on, just a little nearer! " said Mitya, thinking the while: "Only keep crawling up to me, that's all! "

Little by little Travka crawled up to him. Now, by leaning on his gun and bending slightly over, Mitya could have stretched out his arm and stroked the dog's head. But the cunning little man knew that the moment he touched the dog she would leap at him with joyous squeals and drown him.

And so the little man stifled the great heart within him. Calculating every movement, like a soldier ready to deal the fatal blow which should settle the issue of the struggle, he held his breath.

Another moment, and Travka would be on the man's neck, but the little man was not mistaken in his calculations, he thrust out his right arm and clutched the great strong dog by her left hind leg.

He must have been an enemy of Antipych after all, to have acted so treacherously!

Travka made a desperate effort to free herself, and would have torn herself away from the little man's hand, if he had not, now half out of the bog, caught at her other hind leg.

A moment later he was lying across the gun on his stomach, and then, letting go of Travka, went on all fours like the dog, moving the gun before him as he went, until he crawled up to the path used by men, the tall whitish grass

springing up on either side of their footsteps. Once there, he rose to his feet, wiped off the last remains of tears from his face, brushed the mud from his tattered clothes and said imperatively, like a real grown-up man:

"Now you may come to me, my dear Zatravka! "

The words themselves, as well as the voice in which they were uttered, put an end to Travka's hesitations: before her was her former Antipych in all his splendour. With a squeal of joy, recognising her master, she rushed at him, and the man showered kisses on the nose, eyes, and ears of his friend.

It is now time for us to say what we think of the enigmatic words uttered by our late forester, Antipych, when he promised to whisper his truth to the dog if we failed to see him before he died. We do not think it was just a joke on his part. It is quite possible that Antipych, as Travka understood him, that is man in his ancient past, whispered a great human truth into the ear of his friend the dog, and we think that this is the truth about man's eternal, strenuous struggle for love.

12

There is not much left for us to say of the events of that great day in the Bludov Marsh. Though it had been a long day, it was not quite over by the time Mitya escaped from the swamp

with the aid of Travka. After the first transports of joy at her reunion with Antipych, the practical Travka bethought herself of her interrupted hare-hunt. And no wonder, for being a hound, the business of her life was to go after hares for her own sake, but the joy of her life was to catch one for her Antipych. Recognising Mitya for her Antipych, she now resumed her interrupted round, and, soon falling on the scent of the hare, followed the fresh lead with loud barks. Mitya, who was half-dead with hunger, immediately realised that his whole salvation lay in this hare, that if he killed it he could set light to some twigs, as he had often seen Father do, and then bake the hare in the hot ashes. After inspecting the gun and changing the wet cartridges, he stepped out and stood behind a juniper bush.

It was still light enough to look along the sight of the gun, when Travka, chasing the hare from the Flat Stone turned it towards the juniper bush behind which the hunter was hiding. But it so happened that the Grey Squire, when he heard the dog resume the chase, selected the very bush behind which the hunter was hiding for his hiding-place, and now two hunters, man and his bitterest enemy, met face to face. When he saw the grey muzzle no more than five paces away, Mitya forgot all about the hare and fired point-blank at the wolf.

The Grey Squire ended his life without a pang.

Though the chase was of course ruined by the

report Travka did not give it up. But the great thing, the best of all, was not the hare, and not the wolf, but the fact that Nastya, hearing a gun go off near her, gave a shout, and Mitya, hearing her voice, answered it at once and she was at his side in an instant. Soon after this, Travka came back bringing the hare to her new, young Antipych, and the three friends sat and warmed themselves by the fire, preparing for their supper and rest.

Nastya and Mitya lived next door but one from us, and when the next morning their hungry cow began lowing, we were the first to go and see if the children were all right. We guessed at once that they had not spent the night at home and thought they must have lost their way in the marshes. Little by little the other neighbours came up and we all began discussing how best to rescue the children, if they were still alive. We were just going to scatter all over the swamp, when we saw our cranberry-seekers walking up. Indian file, a heavy basket supported on their shoulders by a pole, Travka, the dog which had belonged to Antipych, at their heels.

They told us their adventures in the Bludov Marsh in the utmost detail. And we believed every word they said, for we saw with our own eyes the basketful of cranberries. But there were some among us who could not bring themselves to believe that a boy not yet eleven years old had shot down the wily old wolf. A few of those who believed, however, taking a

big sleigh and a coil of rope, set out for the spot described and soon came back with the dead Grey Squire. Then everyone in the village, and even some from other villages, left their work for a while and gathered together. What talking went on! It is hard to say who was more stared at, the wolf, or the hunter with the double peak to his cap. Looking from the wolf to the boy, people said:

"To think that we laughed at him and called him the Little Farmer! "

After that the Little Farmer began gradually and almost imperceptibly to change, and during the next two years of war grew into a tall stalwart youth. Doubtless he would have become a hero of the war, if the war had not come to an end. And then the Golden Chick gave us all a surprise, too. No one had thought of reproaching her with greed; on the contrary, everyone praised her for her prudence in striving to lead her brother along the well-trodden path, and for getting so many cranberries. But when people came to the village from the home for children evacuated from Leningrad, asking for aid for the sick children, Nastya gave them all her cranberries. And it was only then, winning the little girl's confidence, that we learned how she had reproached herself for her greediness.

It now remains to add just a few words about ourselves: who we are, and what had brought us to the Bludov Marsh. We are prospectors exploring the wealth of the marshes. From the very first days of the war we started working

on this marsh, and we discovered that there was enough peat there to provide a large plant with fuel for a hundred years. Such are the riches concealed in our marshes!

There are still many whose only knowledge of these great storehouses of the sun is that they are inhabited by witches and bogies.

Nonsense. There are no bogies in the marshes.

THE EYES OF THE EARTH

From the Author's Diaries

My whole life was a long road from
loneliness to people.

CREATIVITY

The feeling of love contains the possibility of a new being coming into the world, and even if two loving people do not produce a physical child we anyway measure their love by their efforts for the happiness of this new being.

Life such as this is called marriage. Creativity, I rather think, is determined by the same harmonious correlation of male and female elements in a person's soul as in marriage, resulting in the birth of lasting works of art and extending their influence to their descendents.

WHEN A SUNRAY HEATS THE BARK

A change comes into the life of a birch tree when the first bright and as yet cool ray of predawn light shows up the virginal whiteness of its bark;

when the sun has warmed the white bark and

a big, sleepy black fly alights on it, and then flies on;

when the swollen leaf-buds have made the crown look such a rich chocolate-brown that a bird can hide in it;

when in that chocolate-brown density some of the buds on the slender twigs open up to look like startled tiny birds with green wings;

when the first catkin appears, like a miniature fork with two or three prongs;

when suddenly on a fair day the catkins turn golden and the whole tree stands shimmering with gold; and when at last you walk into a birch grove and a transparent green shade embraces the whole of you;

and then, from the life of one beloved birch tree, you will understand the life of spring as a whole, and the whole of man living his first love which is to determine his whole life.

MY MOTHER'S DREAM

Even in Moscow one can feel the warm vapour rising from the rain-soaked, anguished, cold ground.

We started out after dinner, parked the car just off the road and sat down on the edge of the forest. All the summer birds were singing, and everything exhaled a fragrance. I felt as if all nature were asleep, but I had awakened and was walking about very, very quietly so as not to disturb her, my loving mother.

Nature's sleep just now was exactly like a loving mother's; through her sleep she knew what I was doing, how I had shut the door of the car with a bang, how I had jumped across the ditch, and was now sitting silently somewhere, which worried her for she did not know where.

I coughed, and she stopped worrying: I was there, eating my lunch perhaps, or just day-dreaming.

"Sleep, dear, sleep, don't worry," I spoke softly.

A cuckoo responded from far away, and this cuckoo, and the finches, and the strawberry blossoms, and the pinks, and all this grass so familiar to me since childhood, everything, everything in the world was part of my mother's dream.

MAN AND NATURE

Detgiz Publishers brought out a gorgeous edition of "The Sun's Storehouse". I looked at the illustrations made by Rachev and told him that his landscapes were very good but they were out of balance with the people in the pictures, they did not go together.

"Now that's a question of a general nature," he replied. "Alexander Ivanov spent all his life working on 'Christ Manifesting Himself to the People' and what was the result? He made a success of the landscape, but Christ never came."

"But in my book, aren't the children quite consonant with nature?" I asked.

To this the manager of the illustrations department said:

"It's amazing, but it won't be immediately appreciated."

After all, it has got to be understood that the basic problem of painting—that of harmoniously combining man and nature—has somehow also become the basic problem in my literary work.

An intimate landscape dreads witnesses, and that is why it is so difficult to give a harmonious combined image.

MY ROAD IN LIFE

When I was in the "land of unfrightened birds", taking down the folk tales and legends I had come to seek, I was astonished by the bards' belief in their heroes who belonged to the days of Prince Vladimir the Saint. For us it's ancient literature, but for them it's real life.

But, after all, what inner link can there be between a man of those remote times and today? For answer I thought of the Nadvoitsk waterfall: the waterfall is one, no matter how many different aspects the water assumes as it falls on the rocks below. It is the same with man, falling and rising, a "king of Nature".

And after this it also occurred to me that in my case I visualised my road in literature as progressively ascending, and that at every

given moment I knew exactly where I was going.

Still, I did not go straight on, I went back first, home, like those bards, and from there I seemed to make a huge leap through the air in some inexplicable manner to find myself in my own time. That is why it is so difficult to distribute one's literary efforts along a constantly ascending line of one's achievements.

However, this line does exist, I see it clearly as a staircase. On the first step of this staircase I imagined that I was leaving my homeland in the hope of finding it at its best elsewhere, in some "land of unfrightened birds", where I went after a rolling magic ring.

And every new land I came to I "discovered", that is, I did what all travellers did at all times—I looked upon it as mine, thus extending the limits of my motherland.

I felt then as if I were moving faster than the world, I overtook it and drew from it whatever I needed. But some time ago, as I wrote somewhere, a change came into my perception of the world: it was as if I had come to a standstill while the world circled round me.

TO A FRIEND

My friend, do not fear the drilling thought that comes to you at night and will not let you sleep. Stay awake! And let that thought go on drilling until it has spent itself. Endure it. There'll be an end to this drilling.

You will soon feel that there is a passage from your soul to the soul of another person, and that what you suffered in the night was the breaking of that passage to the other person so that you could be together.

GRASS

My native roots, my mother tongue, and my feeling of homeland have carried me safely through my life's struggles. I grow from the ground like grass, I bloom like grass, I am mowed down, I am eaten up by horses, and still I sprout a jolly green again and by St.Peter's Day am again in full bloom.

That's how I am, and I will be destroyed only if the Russian nation comes to the end of its existence, but far from ending it is perhaps only beginning.

LONELINESS

Today my thoughts revolve round that inner strength in us which develops and unfolds as we fight loneliness. Here I was walking along the path with a man and speaking to him. The man went his way, I was left alone on that path, I had no one to speak to, and so I took out my note-book and started writing in it.

Loneliness is unnatural, and man, the king of Nature, would not be that if he could not fight

his loneliness and, suppressing his natural instincts, live with everyone, a king over all.

The natural men are those who have a family, there are some who have been denied this "happiness" and are the bachelors, and there are men who, having overcome their dependence on nature (loneliness), are the kings.

The struggle for existence is an animal way of survival, but the purely human struggle is the fight against loneliness, the fight against one's separateness, for wholeness.

And so, what I wanted to say is that man becomes king, holding sway over nature, in the course of his fight against loneliness.

A RASPBERRY-RED SPOT

The sun was setting behind the birches, and the birches were reaching for the white, vernal cumulating clouds. The sun made a raspberry-red spot on a pine, the sun was going down, but this spot was moving up and fading away.

I looked at that spot and thought how I wished it could be the same with me: to fade away like that one day, but it had to be when I was on the ascent.

BEFORE DAWN

The darkest time in the forest is not at midnight but just before light.

"How dark it is! " someone will say.

And someone else will look up into the sky and say:

"It means that dawn will be breaking soon."

CREDO

Why do I keep writing about animals, flowers, woods and nature? Many say that I am limiting my talent by ignoring man.

The reason why I write about nature is that I want to write about good things, about living and not dead souls. But evidently my talent is not very big because when I write well about living people everyone says it's not true to life. They do not believe that there is such goodness among people.

Now if I were to write about dead souls like Gogol, I'd become a recognised *realist,* but this recognition would not bring me too much joy.

And here is what I have discovered: when it's in animals that I find our own human goodness, which I know so well and am so accustomed to, everyone believes it at once, everyone is delighted, praising and thanking me.

And that is how I found my beloved pastime: to seek and discover in nature the beautiful aspects of the human soul.

MY WORKING HYPOTHESIS

To me nature means fire, water, wind, stones, plants, animals—all parts of a shattered single entity. And man in nature is the intellect of that great entity which is building up the strength to unite all nature into one.

FAIRY TALE

Two forces shape the world, one operating in similarities, the other in dissimilarities. The first we accept as rules, the second as exceptions.

In dying everything follows similarities, in being born—dissimilarities. All this is expressed perfectly in the fairy tale about the living and dead water.

WORD STARS

Words live in every soul, they glow and shine like the stars in the sky and, like stars, they go out when, their life-span finished, they are uttered.

And then the power of these words, like the light of an extinguished star, flies down to man in space and time.

Sometimes, a star that has gone out in fact, goes on shining for us—people on earth, for thousands of years.

A person may be no more, but his words remain and they fly down from one generation

to the next, like the light of a star that has gone out.

IN TOWN

The day has been sunny and frosty. When the sun retreats behind a cloud, the frost paints tropical plants and seaweeds on the windowpanes. When the sun reappears, the frost gives up its impossible dream of the tropics, weeps and dissolves in drops running down the glass.

This game between the sun and the frost ended when all the clouds vanished from the sky and the sunrays not only dried up all the drops on the windowpanes but actually made the glass hot to the touch. The frost had nothing to make its paintings on now, when the sun set, and it grew dark.

We had a visitor. He looked through the unpainted glass of our sixth-storey window at the grey boxes of houses and said:

"What a beautiful view! "

THE PALACE OF MY YOUTH

Today I am going out to take an early-morning-frost cure.

At eight o'clock the sun has not risen above the houses yet, and in Ordynka the sunrays fall almost horizontally so that they form a sort of sun-roof over all the houses. And a blue

dusk gathers beneath this sun-spun roof and in there you can hear the crow cawing vernally and the sparrow—that herald of the spring of light—chirping in its hiding place in the wall.

In that blue dusk the houses seem to recede into a hazier and hazier blue. And there, further on, somewhere in the depths of that haze towers the Palace of My Youth. At that time I was too foolish and unworthy to enter it, and now I am walking to it, and it is drawing ever nearer, and my heart flutters with the hope that maybe now they'll know what I have become.

There they won't hold my gray hair against me, rather the contrary, they'll put it down to my credit and won't throw me out again.

THE SPRING OF SOUND

In Moscow there was only a mild frost early in the morning; during the day the sun melted the ice into puddles, and when it had set and everything froze slightly over again, a powerful smell of spring filled the air.

In the country, at such a time, the deaf begin to hear a little better, and we do too, because in the winter we all grow a bit hard of hearing.

And suddenly you hear faraway voices or a close-to murmur of falling drops in a different way. Or you hear a word, as if someone were calling you.

It is only recently that I have made this discovery and called it the spring of sound.

Yesterday there was a thaw. I was walking home in the evening in the rain, picking my way through the puddles and trying not to get splashed by a passing car, but I felt wonderful: you see, it was not just this one spring, but all the springs to come that were following me down the street, and I could now understand the awakening of sound.

A DAY IN APRIL

Judged in human terms this day in April resembles the day when she said "Yes". It's like that in nature: after the "Yes" it bursts into bloom.

A day like that, both in nature and in the life of a man, abounds in such enormous strength that one could turn the world upside down if only there was something to get a grip on.

A shy boy asked her something tremulously. She did not reply, and only dropped her head. He asked her again, more tremulously still, and she dropped her head lower. And when at last, overcoming his shyness, he placed his hands on her shoulders, leaned close to her and whispered something for the third time, she lifted her burning face and threw her arms round him.

That was the moment when everything be-

gan to bloom, it was that kind of April day: a girl threw her arms round a boy, and that was her "Yes". The whole of nature also answered "Yes" to us today, and new green grass sprouted everywhere.

It is not surprising that I understand nature so personally, through my own emotions: I had experienced all that myself. What does surprise me is that people who had not experienced this understand me when I tell them about it.

THE BORAGE AND THE JUNIPER BUSH

A borage had woven its way through a rough and untidy juniper bush and, reaching the light, burst into flower. It looked as though the juniper bush itself had blossomed out. People walking past believed this was so, and exclaimed in wonder: "It does happen then that flowers open out on this ugly, untidy bush, and it's the most beautiful sight too! "

"It does happen, it does happen," buzzed the bumble-bees on the borage, while the juniper bush, naturally, kept mum.

A FOREST GLADE

An abandoned road running across a forest glade had become overgrown with that soft, smoky sort of grass which as children we used for wishing on: you pinched a stem and strip-

ped it upwards and if the tuft in your fingers was spiky it meant "no", if it was rounded it meant "yes", or vice versa. And here this grass grew thickly on the abandoned road, marking the passage of man across this lush glade.

The wild carnations were the prettiest things, the flowers were not red or crimson, they were a pre-red colour with tiny white dots and the petals were deckle-edged.

Pink and white morning glory had crept over the sandy path, and it smelt of something from my far-away childhood, but for the life of me I could not remember what.

I cannot imagine what flowers smell of to people who've never had a proper childhood.

THE BREATH OF THE FOREST

Sometimes, silence descends on the forest simply, all sounds are hushed, and you yourself, sitting on a stump somewhere, hold your breath. But sometimes, all the trees, bushes, grasses and birds seem to come to a sudden agreement: "Let's keep quiet, shall we?" All of them together *make* the silence, and then you yourself fall into thought and see your past in a new light.

Not a twig stirs, not a leaf trembles, and the trees are like wax figures. But nobody working in wax could make everything so wrong in such a way that on the whole it would look better than if it was right.

I felt a breath touch my cheek coming from the depths of the forest. Have I imagined it? No. Over there I saw a slender and very long stalk of couch-grass nod its tasselled head to another stalk, and then this other stalk bend a little and nod to the third one. And further away a fern started whispering with others, stirred by what I had felt on my cheek—the breathing of the forest in the dead silence.

THE SOUL GOES INTO HIDING

The sky is grey and lowering, as in autumn, and a nasty thin rain has been falling since morning. The soul goes into hiding, happy that it has a home where it can sit out the bad weather, relax in the quiet, and wait until it again feels like going out and taking a run through all the fields and woods.

EARTH AND SKY

It either rains or shines—a hundred changes in a day.

When everything that has been rain-washed sparkles in the sun, then even the smallest pine, spangled with glittering raindrops, seems to be saying: "I'm grown-up too! "

On a day like that, with so many changes in it, there comes a minute of complete serenity: it's as if you had been trudging and trudging up

a hill, and now you have reached the top at last and can rest for a moment before descending into the valley on the other side.

That is how autumn begins.

THE POWER OF LIFE

Everything crumbles, everything collapses, but nothing dies, and even if it does die it instantly changes into something else. Here's an old tree stump, as it rotted it put on a covering of creeping green moss. And in the heart of that old stump, clothed in green moss, a strong and handsome death-cap has grown up.

You feel baffled sometimes in a forest you know well, as if all the trees and shrubs have suddenly taken off their common green mask, and each tree and shrub has become unique. But when you raise your head and look at them, they also look down at you, each with its own expression.

THE IMAGE OF PEACE

Quiet. Smoke rises straight up from the chimneys. It's warm, bright, and so lovely, tranquil and sensible as it never is in spring.

But the sparrows who live behind the moulding above my window behave in a springtime, animated manner, and one of them was actually carrying a feather for the nest in its beak. What

a place they have found to live—it suits them fine, and does not bother us!

This is exactly the kind of morning when every creature in the world has found its place, and no one bothers anyone: a perfect image of peace in the world!

SOW YOUR FIELD BEFORE YOU DIE

In the movement of the seasons it is a wrench for us to say goodbye to spring and summer, but when autumn comes with its rains and slush, and then a viciously frosty winter, we take comfort in the thought that our planet is bound to go on moving: the good seasons have passed, but then these nasty ones will pass too.

Added to this comforting thought is our tremulously joyful anticipation of next spring.

Thus moves our planet, and thus grows our faith in good triumphing over evil, and our faith that, together with our planet, we are moving towards something welcome.

No pessimist will go against this faith, and if he does not have the faith in him, he has only himself to blame. And people will go on living by this faith as they have always done, saying: "Sow your field before you die."

BODY AND SOUL

Man, as he became organised in the course of centuries, appropriated the whole of nature

into his system. Those parts of his system which are closer to animals and plants are called his *body*, and those parts which belong only to him and do not exist in the rest of nature are called his *soul*.

Many forces of nature are unrecognisably transformed when they become part of man's soul. Thus, for instance, the wind which helps the pollen to be carried from the male pistil to the female stigma is called sexual passion in terms of the body, and love in terms of the soul.

TRACES LEFT BY A GOSHAWK

We saw a dead tree; the wind had broken off its thin crown, and on the stump sat a large goshawk, peering round for prey. I frightened him off, and when three hours later I came back the same way, across the clearing, I saw him sitting there again.

Before then I had seen the remains of a young blackcock amid the red flowers and daisies growing round an old black tree stump. The drops of blood on the grass were so fresh and the bits of flesh so red that the goshawk must have only just finished his meal. A hole in the stump told me what had happened: the blackcock had made it with his bill, clambered up to the edge of the stump, and reached for the blue berry hanging just above. He probably craned his neck or fluttered his wings for bal-

ance, and that was when the goshawk, sitting on the dead tree, noticed him. I suppose he waited for the blackcock to become engrossed in the berry, and then swooped down.

After that I read a lot of stories on the subject, and now when I saw that goshawk sitting on the same dead tree again, everything in that clearing appeared to me as a kingdom apart: down below, in the green light of the sun shining through the leaves, amid gorgeous flowers lived various birds, they ran about, played, fed and multiplied, knowing all the time that if they made the slightest incautious movement the enemy sitting on the top of the dead tree would instantly kill them, and all that remained of them would be dry feathers on the green grass and drops of blood on the white daisies.

...How very quiet it was! None of the birds sang any more. And only the cranes were crying further north somewhere, perhaps just over the Dubna, framed in impassable thickets.

A THOUGHT ALL YOUR OWN

When you're out shooting you become soaked in sweat, then it dries on you; the rain comes down, you get drenched through and when you've dried you again sweat so profusely that you fancy that grass has sprouted through your shirt, gathered gossamer and became sprinkled with the tiniest of sparkling dewdrops.

That's when everything bookish and con-

trived evaporates from your mind and if a thought comes into your head, trust it! It's a thought all your own that has grown out of your head, like moss from a tree stump.

BLOSSOM AND FRUIT

Someone brought a ripe strawberry from the woods with the white blossom intact under the berry, the two were there together.

We all examined this amazing phenomenon of nature and did not know what to say since all of us had a poor knowledge of botany.

"Such is its nature then, for the fruit to ripen and the blossom to stay on," said a simple man.

And the woman I loved pointed at me and said: "That's him."

* * *

The person you love in me is better than I am, of course. I am not like that. Love me, and I'll try to be better than me.

LOVE

For us, people, there is no example closer to home than the sight and sound of the swollen leaf-buds bursting in spring. We say to ourselves then: "What about us, people, is not

each of us separately like a burgeoning leaf-bud, which contains a future tree? Do we not feel it in ourselves as our body, that separates us from the entire great world of nature?"

Our body is separated from the world of nature by our sense of possession which we want to consolidate and so waste our whole life trying to keep our leaf-bud from bursting.

But for all our efforts to suppress the life secreted in us, comes spring, leaf-buds burst open, the green emerges, and we, die-hard proprietors of imprisoned nature—otherwise our bodies—go into raptures and this wonderful feeling of free life we call love.

JULIE

There are a lot of tree stumps in the forest and there must be one on which I had once sat down to write. Julie, running ahead of me, sat down beside it and waited for me to emerge from the bushes with a question in her eyes: "Do we go on or do we sit down and write?" This time I wanted to write.

"We're going to write," I told her.

I sat down. Julie sat too, leaning against my knee. She always does that, and I have two explanations for it: one is that it would be quicker for her to warn me if an enemy appeared, and two that by huddling to me she'd be participating in my creative work.

* * *

At first Julie would follow the tracks in the snow, and when she lost them she followed her dream, and thus she crossed the entire field in a dream.

Out in the open the snowstorm was terrible, and through the swirls of snow Julie saw a flying bird and dashed after it as fast as she could run on the crust of ice. She caught it, seized it, but it turned out to be a dry oak leaf. Too bad! Here came another leaf, but she let it fly, she did not run after it.

It's the same with us, we too go chasing after our dream, like Julie after what she thought was a bird, and with time we learn to control our impulses and not confuse our little bird with a dry leaf.

* * *

In a dark fir forest, a birch tree burst into leaf like a green flame, and the breeze started playing with its little leaves at once, and it would go on playing with them all spring, all summer and autumn, until it had ripped them all off and the birch would again be left with nothing but its bare slender branches.

"You know, Julie," I said to my clever dog. "Maybe this birch tree had once run about like you and I, but it took a fancy to the breeze and liked it to play with its leaves. And so it stopped running, and surrendered to the wind, and so it

has been standing still since then, letting the breeze play with it all it wanted."

CADEAU

This story is not about Julie but about my big pointer Cadeau. He is a very kind, lazy, fat dog who, if he isn't hunting, is sure to be sleeping somewhere where it's sunny.

The mosquitoes would not let him sleep this summer. His very short hair is no protection from their bites. We could hear him snapping his teeth at the mosquitoes all night long. Poor Cadeau, he so loved his sleep!

But then the days grew shorter, the summer was waning, and the mosquitoes disappeared.

Cadeau came out to the porch, looked about him with satisfaction written large on his broad ginger face, and we read his thought: "I believe they won't bite me any more, I've caught the lot."

SWALLOWS

In the hayloft, not very far up, there was a swallow's nest with four chicks in it. I have long been dying to see how fledglings fly out of their nest, because it's nothing short of a miracle if the nest is stuck to a fifth-storey window with a stone-paved street below. Some fall, that!

On awakening this morning I heard the swallows chirping not only in the nest but somewhere else besides. I found a chick sitting on the hay, I took it in my hands, tossed it out of

the door, off it flew. The old swallows surrounded it, the father, the mother aud the other relatives gathered to watch, and the young fledgling circled sedately between them. Now the second youngster jumped out of the nest, then the third one, and as for the fourth we pushed it out ourselves.

The swallows learn to fly in that moment of fall. But it's like that with us, people, too, the crawling, the running, and the flying. Those who risked flying also had to do it in a moment of fall.

MOTHERLAND

It would be better, of course, to work as a citizen of the world, but how step over your Motherland, over your own self? After all, it's only I myself, really part of the rough stuff of my Motherland, who can transform her, asking her all the time: "Does it hurt here?" And if I hear that it does, I feel my way along in another place. Will an outsider be so considerate, will he want to consider the human element behind the natural wealth of iron ore, oil and coal?

* * *

Motherland. What her son will say about her, what he will discover cannot be discovered by a stranger, an outsider. And what this stranger will see is unknown to her son.

BIRDS

Take a look at the birds: do you think they have an easy life? They get bumps under their wings from flying, they've only one day in spring to make merry, and then off they go to the nest to brood, never stirring, and once the chicks have been hatched they have their work cut out for them, fetching worms for them the livelong day. And once they are fledged, off they go, rubbing bumps under their wings again. They can't even enjoy eating or drinking, with enemies all round: they peck once, and glance round, peck once, and glance round.

Yet, knowing all this, you look at a bird—there's nothing more beautiful in the world, nothing more free. Free as a bird, we say.

A PATH

What bores me more than anything else is when something hackneyed, many times repeated and trite is forced upon my attention. And yet there are commonplace things that never bore me, I can look at them all my life, for instance, a path trodden by countless feet, or the grass in my backyard.

The most wonderful place in the world are the village backyards: glum barns, a semicircle of fields, and then the forest. The sun was shining after the rain. I walked hatless along the path between the barns, a much-trodden path

with the grass flattened and bare ground showing. And to right and left of this path rose the grass which, I feel, has been with me since the day I was born—couch-grass, dandelions, and whatnot.

"Look at you standing there! " I said. The grass was there, and the path, and all that together made by beloved Motherland.

* * *

Today I was thinking of my serious occupation which for everyone else is only a source of amusement, recreation and fun. For those who come after me will I remain an ordinary Russian eccentric, a jolly hermit, or will this laughably small effort of mine result in my ideas becoming renowned and myself being called a pioneer or a precursor of a new understanding of the "world in oneself"?

What if it suddenly turns out that the knowledge accumulated by mankind is so vast that it is beyond the grasp of the greatest intellect? What if the main reason for our modern confusion and discord lies in these accumulated semi-riches of semi-intellect, and that people should suspend all these analytical experiments and get down to the simplest synthetic investigations. What if it is here, in the course of this work, that a genius capable of assimilating the whole of mankind's experience will emerge?

REQUEST TO READERS

Raduga Publishers would be glad to have your opinion of this book, its translation and design and any suggestions you may have for future publications.

Please send all your comments to
17, Zubovsky Boulevard, Moscow, USSR.

"In no other of our Russian writers have I seen or felt as harmonious a combination of love for the Earth and knowledge of it as I see and feel in your books."

Maxim Gorky. From a letter to M. Prishvin

"Prishvin's prose can well be called the 'flowering meadow' of the Russian language, for his words sparkle with freshness and light."

Konstantin Paustovsky

This *Selection* from Mikhail Prishvin (1873-1954) includes short stories written throughout his lifetime, as well as novellas from the cycles *Phacelia, Dripping Forest, The Eyes of the Earth, Hunting Stories,* and others.

The author, fascinated by the infinite beauty of Nature, tried, in his own words, "to seek and discover in it the best there is in the human soul".

The edition includes a foreword and commentary.

ISBN 5-05-00002